

FALLING FOR YOU

A RAYLLUM ZINE

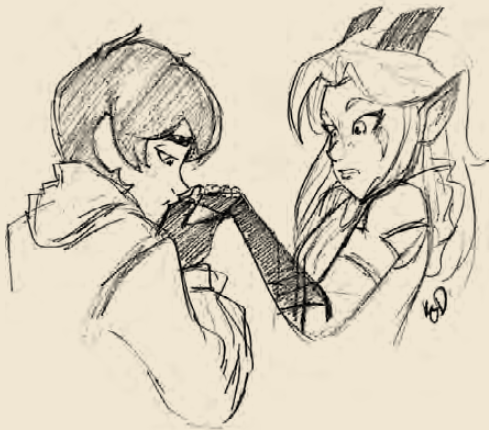




A narrative of love.



This book is dedicated to the amazing crew at Wonderstorm and Bardel who bring us the show in the first place. It's an understatement to say that these characters and the people who have created them have all made a huge difference in our lives.



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FALLING FOR YOU
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FOREWARD

Falling for You: A Rayllum Zine has grown into more than a zine. It's a 400 page book –an anthology in honest definition –totally devoted to Rayla and Callum from the hit fantasy animation show, The Dragon Prince. This book is dedicated to their relationship in its entirety from the night of their fateful meeting to their newfound romance across time and space.

Developed by the XADIA MOD SQUAD, this book was produced by a team of five dedicated mods looking to bring you a labor of love about love.

Producing this book has been an amazing experience that has not only brought all of us oportunities, but brought the Mod Squad and all our wonderful contributors together as a family and it has a special place in our hearts. Now, we want to share it with you.

This book will take you through the ups and downs of Rayla and Callum's beautiful relationship and what their love –and The Dragon Prince at large – means to us..

Tamika Kuno Williams
Design Director



RAYLA AND CALLUM

Over the course of twenty-seven episodes, “The Dragon Prince” accomplishes much in ways of worldbuilding and character development. This zine, then, is just one love letter to the beating heart of the series for many fans: the inspiring relationship between Callum and Rayla. As an artistic, awkward human prince, and a sword slashing, untested elven assassin, respectively, the two have little in common when they first meet in dire circumstances—and on opposite sides. Soon, though, they choose to take a chance on peace and each other and set out to change their world for the better.

This zine documents the journey that followed, through both fic and art from an array of talented and impassioned fans. From cautious trust to fortified friendship, falling in love (or off cliffs), and the imaginings of a happily ever after, Callum and Rayla have had many ups and downs. Amidst all this change were some things never did, like their ride or die nature that was present from the start, a quiet sense of subtle humour, and the care and concern they’ve continually shown each other as their bond deepened.

It has been an extraordinary and rewarding experience to watch their relationship blossom and develop from enemies to friends to lovers over the course of three amazing seasons. We hope you enjoy our imagined take on it.

WordswithDragons AKA Raayllum
Editor



MEETING



Dear Callum,

I don't really know why I'm writing this. I could just go tell you, but I think it's... I don't know. I just want to write it instead. Put it down in history as something we can remember a little bit more. Beyond our disastrous first meeting? I know I almost killed you and that wasn't exactly fun for either of us, especially you, but sometimes I think about what it would have been like to meet you under different circumstances. . You could use that big brain of yours and dream up a few possibilities, I'm sure.

Do you think we have been friends right away? Do you think you could have gotten a crush on me earlier? Maybe you could have let me try one of those jelly tarts Ez is always going on about. Showed me around the castle properly.

You might have even liked my ears.

Just something I was thinking about.

Love,
Rayla



Halfway
to the
Sun













PIVOT

by Wordswithdragons (Raayllum)

He likes her too much.

This is not the first time the thought has struck Callum—in fact it strikes him quite often, *too* often—which is exactly the problem. It strikes him when he and Ez go to sleep on the first night and she's just up sitting on a rock. Rayla alternates between looking at the castle and giving Bait the stink eye, as though her retinas haven't forgiven the toad yet for blinding her momentarily, and it's oddly endearing. It strikes him when she helps him and Ez make a fire for the night once they've moored on the shore, whenever he holds the cube in his hands and thinks how she risked her life to get it *anyway*, and even when he'd been kind of a jerk about the whole thing. The thought strikes him whenever Rayla smiles.

She's far too likeable, he thinks, warm and funny and kind. It's not fair. She tried to kill Ezran. She's not telling them *something*. It shouldn't be this hard to keep up his guard around her. She certainly has very little trouble keeping her guard up around him when it matters to her.

He turns over everything she told them on the shore in his mind as he turns over the cube in his hands. His fingers itch for something more to do. He almost goes to get his primal stone out of his bag, or his sketchbook, to have something other than his thoughts occupying his head, because it's frustrating. He can't quite figure her out. Maybe drawing her would help?



Callum still remembers being struck by just how young Rayla looked, when he first saw her, even in the soft slant of her chin before she'd taken her hood off and revealed her startling violet eyes and plump cheeks still smoothed with adolescence. He didn't know elves could look that young. Or aesthetically pleasing.

She would be a good drawing subject, he supposes, settling on his sketchbook and propping it open on one knee. He reaches for his charcoal next. The campfire by the shore won't stay lit for long and the past few nights she's pushed them to go to bed early and get earlier starts. Maybe he can convince her to let him draw a little longer, too, and sleep in a little later? The boat, beyond seasickness, had meant they made good time today. Or he thinks they have; he still hasn't managed to fully conceptualize how far away Xadia really is, or how close.

The sooner this mission is over, the better, he knows somewhere deep down. He and Ez can go home and see their dad again. This whole thing will be a flighty, quick paced adventure that led him to magic and hopefully to ending the war. Important, maybe even life changing—which is why it should be completed as quickly as possible. Even if that means saying goodbye to Rayla.

Even if he pushed the boat away (which means it'll take *longer*.)

Callum buries himself in his sketchbook after a dinner of berries foraged by Rayla, listening to Ezran have a one sided conversation with Bait. The few times he looks up, he catches Rayla's eye and she grins, amused by and attentive to his little brother. He draws the giant fish and thinks of how he told her to jump—told her to trust him to save her life—and she did, and he did. Mulls over her words on the shore.

Now, this is a journey of redemption.

We're in this together.

If she could tell them all that, then what can't she? *Why* can't she?

He lets Ezran go wandering off with her for more firewood after dinner, but keeps the Egg by his side in Ezran's pack. Plans privately to himself that he'll have to strike a deal with Ez, somehow. That it would be better for now for them to carry the egg. That's the safest, smartest thing, for all of them. Even if it makes his gut churn. Even if he wants to trust her, he can't.

Even if he *likes* her (and he *definitely* shouldn't).

*

Rayla knows that, in some ways, she was prepared for Ezran. The second assassination target, the one she went out to find specifically: young, defenseless, easy. The thought makes her sick now, as he picks up twigs with his tiny hands, beaming whenever she approves his findings as suitable for their fire that night. She never expected he'd be her friend, but she knew *of* the kid, at the very least. As horrible as it may be.

Callum was a surprise. He's a prince (whatever 'step' means) and a mage (but an untrained one). He wasn't her target but she nearly killed him anyway. He's goofy and has hair that falls in front of very nice green eyes and he's one of the most annoying people she's ever met. (Seriously, who throws a primal stone?) And one of the sweetest, next to his brother.

Callum *cares*, almost incurably, and it would be solely endearing to her if it wasn't so gosh darn inconvenient. Why does he always have to notice her binding? In the forest with the castle looming behind them; on the river after she'd just spent a day literally and metaphorically spilling her guts. He's got her thinking about metaphors. It's terrible, all terrible.

He's too sweet to hate. Cheering her up (his questions and hit-or-miss jokes); wanting to hear about Xadia; his hand on her shoulder,

his promise. We're in this *together*. Pushing the boat away.

It makes her feel even worse about what she's keeping from him and Ezran. She doesn't know when she let them under her skin. She doesn't know when they started worming their way into her heart. Why did Callum have to be so damn stubborn and persistent? Couldn't he just be grouchy and accept that she's just the way she is, and there's no point in going any deeper? Nobody has ever liked her depths.

At least, not until this afternoon. Part of her cringes at how she'd talked about her family. *My parents aren't really dead, but I wish they were*. Wonders how much it'll come back to bite her in the butt, considering she knows he's lost at least one parent, even if he doesn't know about the king yet. She doesn't want to think about how badly that bridge will be burned once they have to cross it. Shuts her eyes and inhales the remnants of smoke from their campfire, once the boys have laid down to sleep, and she's heard them nod off one by one.

Callum hasn't let her carry the egg. Maybe she should be grateful and see it as an act of good faith. Him and Ezran carry the heavy stuff so she can move as quick as ever. But it feels like a denial. It feels like a rejection. (She stubbornly rejects the tiny voice in the back of her head that reminds her her hand is in no poor condition to be carrying something as heavy and precious as the last egg of the King of the Dragons.)

She's a *Moonsbadow elf*, for crying how loud. Who cares if two *human* princes—one who is incredibly obnoxious and annoying and adorable—trust or like her?

Rayla tugs at her binding but it doesn't give any relief. It tightens twice a day now and she knows she deserves it, on some level. Because isn't caring too much about humans what got them into this mess in the first place?

She looks over at the high rising tree roots the boys are sleeping under, the egg between them. The egg. That's all that matters. They have to keep it safe.

And she would be able to, if Callum would just let her carry it.

*

Callum absolutely cannot let Rayla carry the egg. She's being *weird* and mean—well, weirder and meaner than usual. Usually, he *gets* why she's so annoyed with him. He's not always the most sensitive and has a lot of things about elves to unlearn. But she rushed them from camp this morning and they didn't get to eat breakfast, and she was even a bit snippy with Ez, and wouldn't tell Callum *why*. Just snapped at him and shoved his bag at his chest and stalked off.

She just keeps walking up ahead now, too, shoulders bent and hands clenched, and Callum feels like he's just staring at her. (Like, more than usual, too.) Not for the first time he wishes he could see inside her head, or maybe her heart, and get an accurate picture of what's going on. Sometimes she's so transparent he never has to second guess—even with a sword levelled at his chest, *You know this is wrong* fell easy and sure from his lips—but other times, like now, that's all he ever does.

He remembers turning on his heel to get away from her, the horror when she caught up and kicked him down. It seems a little silly now to be *scared of Rayla*. She's tough and kinda mean but also really nice (although she's not nice today) and she trusts him. He thinks. She'd jumped, hadn't she, even though he doesn't know how to use fulminus, even though they didn't know it would work. She'd jumped anyway. A literal leap of faith. How can talking be harder than that?

Then he forgets the food, and *now* she wants to tease him—*You had*

one job: carry your stale human food. How could you leave it?— even though it's *her* fault (sort of) and he would welcome the reprieve from standoffish Rayla if it resulted in anything else. She gets angry at Bait for drinking her moonberry juice, and part of him has to admit that Rayla is kinda cute when she's annoyed (especially when she's not necessarily annoyed at *him*). Face and brows all scrunched up and ears slanted. He slides into her personal space for a closer look until she stomps away, huffing.

Callum smiles—*I think she's hangry*—but Ez just stays confused. They move on from hills to mountains proper. Cold wet snow clings to his pant legs, Ezran stumbling behind him, and Rayla is as unrelenting in her pace as ever.

So if he finally snaps and loses it, no one can blame him, really, can they? Callum climbs up onto the snowy ledge after her, thinking that maybe, they're finally on equal footing, maybe they can finally stop dancing around this—*I could take it, I could return it to Xadia on my own*—but something in his chest breaks, too, at her words. He can't take the second guessing anymore, the doubts, the questions encircling his mind, as tight as the binding on her wrist looks to be. He just wants to *know*.

Then what's stopping you? he snaps, and thinks *maybe this is it, maybe she'll—*

But Rayla doesn't. Scrounges up the reason behind their mission in the first place, detached. *Human princes returning the egg to the Dragon Queen, that's the gesture that matters!* Almost professional, if they both weren't shouting. Her answer isn't that she cares about him or Ez. Isn't that they're friends, nor that they're in this together. Not that she likes them, the way he and Ez had admitted about her to each other just that morning. It's not the answer Callum wanted. It's not the answer he hoped for.

Disappointment hits low in his belly even as more rage rears up

in his throat, until Ezran brings them to a screeching halt with a shush and warnings of an avalanche. Then Bait burps and they're running (for their lives again; Callum only has a second to wonder if this is going to be a consistent theme) down the snow—Ez trips and falls and Rayla helps him up, hands squeezing, when she *yelps* and hurries them on without answers, but this time Callum won't complain.

Then the ice. There's cold terror in his chest, fingers freezing as he slides on the frozen surface of the lake towards his baby brother. *Ez, don't move! We're coming to get you.* He eases the egg out of Ezran's arms and into his own. Rayla skids after them this time, on the ice. White fluff collects at her feet as she looks to him for direction, for once. What *now*? It doesn't make him feel any better because he doesn't *know* exactly.

The egg is heavy in his arms. The ice is still cracking under their feet, Ezran and Rayla on either side of him. Looking at him to see what he'll do, what *they* should do. He looks at the egg. A small smile drifts onto his lips because the answer is obvious.

"Now," he says, turning towards her. His feet pivot carefully. "I'm going to hand you the egg." Thoughts race through his mind. Is this smart? Is this safe? He wants to trust her, but should he? She still hasn't told them whatever she's hiding, and he still knows deep down that she's hiding *something*.

But it doesn't matter.

He holds the egg out to her, hoping the girl in the boat, on the shore, the softness underneath the secrecy and insecurity, is still there. "I'm sorry if I was a jerk before, Rayla," he says, arms straining under the weight. "We're lucky to have you as a friend."

She hasn't apologized, hasn't called them friends, either, but it doesn't matter. Just this, as his small smile gives way to the

desperation of their circumstances, to the egg and him and Ezran still in harm's way. He has to trust she can get them out of this.

"I *do* trust you," he says, and Callum looks right at her.

*

Rayla lets him see right through. She can't stop herself, as it all comes spilling out (except for one, *the king*) as the egg goes spilling in, crashing through the ice and Ezran—*Ezran*—

The nickname falls off her tongue for the first time and with ease, despite the way her throat is tight. "It's going to be okay. Ez will get it." She's just glad that she's able to keep Callum from diving in after him, glad they're both okay. That they're all okay as she wraps her arms around the two boys, one soaking and one still shaking, and holds them close, before the trio realizes that something is wrong with the egg.

At least now they can deal with it together.

Afterwards, in the cave, when Ez has finally fallen asleep by the fire, covered by Callum's cloak, the egg cocooned safely in the corner, Rayla catches Callum shivering from where she sits beside him. His fingerless gloves can only do so much.

She turns towards him and holds out her hand. Callum blinks at her and she gives her hand a light shake. "It can't hurt," she mumbles, ignoring the heat that rises to her cheeks. Dumb human prince.

He smiles like something's a little funny—maybe the absurdity of their circumstances, and the fact she thinks she'd die for him and Ez, even though four days ago she was trying to kill them, him—but he takes her hand anyway. Rayla finds his shivering wasn't an act; his fingers are *freezing*.

"Do humans just have poor circulation?" she asks, prodding at his strange pinky finger, and Callum laughs, although they're both sure to keep their volume down. They don't want to wake Ezran.

"Do elves have *good* circulation?" he says. "I don't exactly have anything to compare it to."

"Fair enough." She lets go of his hand once it's warm enough, and he puts away his sketchbook proper. Each of them should be turning in soon anyway. It's been a long day and largely one disaster after another (she hopes this won't be a pattern).

Callum takes off his scarf and starts making a pillow, and then stops and turns back to her. "Rayla?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad we're friends."

It's then that she realizes she hasn't said it back, and that it might not matter, at least, not to him. But if it matters to her, now. There's a sweet smile on his face, endearing again. The fire dims as her chest warms and returns it. "Me too," she says.

Maybe they like each other just the right amount.

*Say the word and
I'll go back into
that tower with
you.*



FRIENDSHIP

Dear Rayla,

First of all, I thought your ears were cute. I was just scared for my life, but we're past that, remember? If we had met under different circumstances, I think I would have wanted a friendship with you right away.

I would have thought you were cool, fast, smart. I would have thought you were beautiful.

I would have fallen in love with you sooner. You probably don't believe in love at first sight. Honestly, I'm not sure if I do or not, but I think a part of me would have loved you the moment I first saw you.

I know so.

Love,
Callum













Wait, you have
one pair of toes
less, too??

That's so
cool!

And
weird.

More like you
have a pair too
many, you weirdos.



Dani
Rosa

@piecesofarose













SOMETHING BETTER

by Thosefiveadoraburrs (Spiritypowers) and Wordswithdragons (Raayllum)

Rayla frowns when she catches Callum out of the corner of her eye, fidgeting with his hair. It's not the first time, but it's still been a few times too many as she allows herself to watch the internal panic playing out across his face. He flattens down the brown strands, then straightens, flattens, musses, and then slicks back the front of his hair. She snorts. Absolutely hopeless.

Ezran is still out with Ellis and Bait and Ava—something about wanting to show Zym his first proper sunset—and Rayla nearly went with them. After her and Callum's conversation earlier in the day—*You and I don't have that yet*—she wasn't exactly keen to be alone with him, much less in the dwellings Lujanne had given them. Yet here she is.

Finally, she can't take it anymore.

"You're going to be fine, Callum," she says, tone sharp and anything but reassuring. She can't say it doesn't sting to have him shut her down and then be going on a date with Claudia later that day.

"What?" Callum's voice cracks as he whirls around to face her, away from the mirror, and her jaw tightens, pushing the thought of how adorable it is when his voice pitches up like that deep down into the back of her brain where it will never see the light of day.

"You've known Claudia your whole life," she explains to him slowly,

resting her cheek on her hand, her elbow propped up on her knee from where she sits on the bed closest to him. Isn't this obvious?
"You must've hung out one on one before."

His cheeks flush a light pink. "Kind of? Not really. Usually not more than, like, five minutes. Or at least, never for longer than five minutes before I'd put my foot in my mouth somehow. It was always her and me and Ez and Soren usually. Particularly in the last few years."

"Still." Rayla glances away, her heart rising and falling. The nervous, dopey, earnest look on his face, even amid his slightly worried frown, does funny things to her insides. She doesn't entirely like it. Especially since she knows she's not the cause of it. Wait. *What?*
"You're being dumb."

"Oh." Callum deflates as he turns back to the mirror and fidgets with the end of his scarf.

Rayla softens despite herself, awkward with apology. "No, I mean—she's not going to care what your hair looks like, or anything. It's... normal, I suppose, to be nervous before a date."

"You've been on one?" he asks.

Her cheeks heat. "No."

"Oh." He sounds genuinely surprised, as though he thinks she's extremely date worthy, and Rayla tries not to read into it too much.
"Yeah. This is my first date too."

"I get that," she says, a little gentler. "But you don't have to be nervous. If she's going out with you, it's because she likes you for *you*, right?"

Callum turns thoughtful. "I guess so."

"Well now," Rayla says, standing up and placing a hand on her hip, "that shouldn't be too hard to believe." She falters when he doesn't smile.

"I... don't really know," he admits. "I'm just the step prince, and I'm always making a fool of myself, and I was good at magic, but now that's gone, so..." He sighs and tugs at his jacket. "It's fine. I'm fine." He pats his hair helplessly again. "I know Claudia doesn't really care about my hair. I just... I wanna look nice, y'know?"

It's a thought that comes unbidden, before she can push it away completely: *You already do*. Callum always looks sort of cute. Even when he's being an annoying little shit. She takes a breath. "Do you want some help?"

Despite herself, Rayllum can't help but smile when Callum visibly brightens. "Uh, yeah, sure! Thanks." Then he pauses. "Uh, how?"

Rayla walks towards him, taking his shoulders and gently turning him back towards the mirror. This'll be easier when he's not looking right at her, somehow. She fishes out a comb from the pocket in her vest near where she keeps her swords and phial of moonberry juice; even assassins need to look presentable.

"If you want it to look nice and stay nice," she considers, "we should probably just smooth it all out."

"I've been kind of trying, but it won't—"

"Not completely flat to your weirdly smooth head," she says, but it's with a teasing smile this time. "You humans and your hair." She begins combing it out, trying to ignore how soft his hair is between her fingers, because she does have to touch it to brush it. "A comb is easier than just using your fingers, don't you think?"

“We didn’t really get time to pack one,” Callum says, but for the first time his shoulders ease and he puffs out a breath of relief. Of gratitude. “Thanks, Rayla.”

She finishes combing out the front, ignoring the tightness in her chest as she steps away. “Of course. Just remember, Claudia is probably pretty nervous too. You’ll be fine.”

Callum shrugs and straightens out his jacket, but this time he’s grinning. Swept away in excitement and giddiness, it seems, his thoughts almost absentminded. “I dunno about that,” he says happily. “She’s always pretty calm and collected when she’s not goofing off. And she knows I’ve kind of liked her for a long time—I’m not exactly good at hiding how I feel.”

“You don’t say,” Rayla says dryly and she cracks a smile when he laughs.

Callum looks back at her, softness curving his smile. “Yeah. I dunno why she’s starting to show more interest *now*, but... it’s nice.”

Rayla’s stomach drops. She hates where her mind goes, and hates that she might be right. She doesn’t want to be right. Even if being wrong would hurt her in its own way, at least they’d be safe—Zym would be safe—and Callum would be happy. And his heart would be safe.

Since when did she start caring about his *heart*?

“Maybe she was scared deep down, too,” she shrugs instead. It feels uncomfortably true, but not for Claudia. Rayla swallows. “Or you know, adventure and quest sort of thing. You have to make every moment matter, right?”

“Yeah.” He has a wistful look in his eye. “It’s kind of... weird, that we might be... Different, now. Maybe that’s why she didn’t show interest

before?”

Her throat tightens. “Maybe,” she considers. “You have changed a lot.”

Callum smiles at her, coming back to the present. “You didn’t know me that well before.”

“I think I saw some of your most graceful moments,” she trills, because this is good. Fun. Familiar. Because this won’t hurt later. “When you were running away from me.”

“Oh yeah, I was a real threat.”

Rayla’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “I don’t know,” she says. “Maybe I’ve just seen the best sides of you. Some of the worst sides, too.” She thinks of the egg and the ice and snapping at Ezran. “But... it’s been nice. Getting to know you, and... watching you change. I’m sure Claudia feels the same.” Her eyes widen by a fraction when she realizes what she’s just said. “I mean, since she’s also known you for so long. I’m sure the differences are really obvious, and you are more confident now. And Ez has changed a lot too, and...” She coughs. She needs to stop talking. Gods, just how much has he rubbed off on her?

But Callum’s smile is so earnest and sweet when he looks at her that Rayla can’t help but relax, if not melt, just a little. “Thanks. It’s been nice watching you change too. You’re a lot more open now.”

She smiles back, but it feels tight. *Still not open enough*. “Thanks,” she says quietly.

She watches him walk away down the path, a spring in his step, and it takes a long time for her to turn away. She can think Callum is cute, because he is. She can think he’s brave and smart and kind, because he is all of those things. But she doesn’t like him. She does not have a crush on him. No ifs ands or buts. She *can’t*.

But maybe, she can save Callum from being crushed further, if Claudia shows the worst of herself. If Rayla wasn't wrong to suspect Soren, to mistrust the young Dark Mage. She looks down, her brow furrowing. If telling Callum the truth about his dad won't break him already.

Rayla closes her eyes as night falls.

She needs to talk to Lujanne.

*

"I'm sorry."

Ez is asleep, Bait on his stomach and Zym in his arms, the fire crackling faintly on the shoreline. Rayla looks up. Callum apologizes for a lot of things, most of them well deserved, but she isn't sure what he's apologizing for this time. Besides, she isn't angry or even irritated with him now. She doesn't want to be. She doesn't think she could even muster it up, right now. Maybe she should, but the look on his face, when they'd left on Phoe Phoe...

It'd taken all day to make their way down the cliffs, but they'll reach town by tomorrow morning for sure.

"It's fine, Callum."

"No, it's not."

Rayla nearly points out that he hasn't clarified *why* it's not fine, but she already knows. It's what must have been bothering him the entire ride over. "You didn't know they were lying."

"I shouldn't have had to know. I should've listened to you—"

"You did," she says, now *almost* sharp, even if she keeps her voice down to a whisper. Ez is a pretty heavy sleeper but they still don't want to wake him up. "When it mattered, so why are you still beating yourself up for it now? It's not like I didn't make mistakes too."

"Because I almost didn't, and—"

"You can't beat yourself up over something that almost happened, either." She looks at him over the firelight, the way the shadows from the flame and his eyes shift, how he won't quite meet her eyes either, how flat out miserable he looks. The sight of it makes her heart twist. "Callum. What's this really about?"

She hears his breath hitch, sees the tremble in his bottom lip that means he's going to cry. She wishes she didn't know the signs now, as he starts to. "I'm an idiot," he chokes out.

Rayla gets up and sits next to him. "No, you're not."

"I just saw what I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe my stepdad was around, that Lord Viren wouldn't have told his kids anything, that Claudia..." He takes a big, shaky breath and scrubs at his face with his hands. "And I hurt you."

Rayla stares at him. "Callum, you didn't mean—"

"No, but I did. I listened to them over you, even though I'd already told you that I trusted you."

"You'd known them longer."

"I've been through more with you."

"Eleven days, Callum." They'll make it to the town and find a ship to take them across the sea they're camped nearby tomorrow.

“Almost twelve.”

She reaches over and takes his scarf, lifting it to his eyes to wipe away his tears for him. “You’re being dumb,” she chides gently. “And entirely too hard on yourself. You trusted me when it mattered the most and you had the least reason to. Just like last time on the ice.”

“But it shouldn’t just be at the last minute. I trust you, completely. And I told you that, and...” He takes a breath. “And I’ll show it. Not just when... When things could go horribly wrong if I don’t.”

“To be fair, that’s most of the time,” she teases, smiling when he manages to laugh. “Our lives are pretty chaotic. And besides, it doesn’t matter if we hurt each other. We’re friends. We’re bound to. It just... doesn’t make a difference, not really. As long as we figure it out and make up.”

“But I don’t like hurting you.”

“I don’t like hurting you either,” she says, her voice softer. “But I know you’ve forgiven me when I have. And I know I’ve done the same with you. So we’re okay.” Their eyes meet. “We’ll always be okay.”

He smiles fully and this time it reaches his eyes as he looks back at her. The fire turns warm. “I know what you mean,” he says, lips lifting further. “You could never hurt me in a way that matters more than our friendship.”

This time, when her heart flutters, she doesn’t push it away. “You really think that?”

“It’s already happened.”

The king. She swallows. “Callum...”

“I just... I wish I’d listened to you, right from the start. And I can’t believe I said that we didn’t have what I thought I had with them, but... We don’t. We have something better. And I should have trusted it.”

Even as her breath fails her, for just a moment, something warm blooms in Rayla’s chest. And this time, she doesn’t fight it. “Well,” she says, her head scrambling for words—what can she say after *that?*—“I know we both will, from now on. I’m just... sorry you learned it this way.”

Callum nods solemnly, before his brow furrows, his jaw set. “I’m not.”

“What?”

“I think I needed to know. Both about them, and...” He softens. “About us. You’d never hurt me the way they did.”

Stupidly, though, her mind latches onto the earlier sentence. “...Us?”

“O-our friendship,” he clarifies. His cheeks look redder in the firelight, but Rayla assumes it’s just a trick of the light. “Relationship. Trust, you know.”

She nods. It still feels like everything. She smiles. “Yeah.” She catches his eye and it coaxes a smile out of him, too. “I know.”

This time when she watches him leave, it means watching him fall asleep, their bodies curved towards each other with some space in between. She watches between thinly closed eyes as his face smooths out, as his breathing evens out. His cheek is squished slightly against his arm and scarf. He looks adorable.

There’s no sinking feeling in her gut this time, just a warm one in

her heart that's safe to bask in. Maybe she does like Callum. Maybe she can like him.

But she *knows* they're friends, and all that it entails—everything that it means to each of them—and that's the best part of it all.

She falls asleep with a smile on her face.

A PERFECT FIT

by Thosefiveadoraburrs (Spiritypowers)

It takes a while before it strikes her how *easy* this is. They'd fallen into a routine, after the incident on the ice. Back then, it had been just to keep Ezran warm and safe and make sure he could rest comfortably even in the confines of a cold little cave, but they'd never really fallen out of it since. The routine goes like this: Rayla goes out and gathers wood while Callum rips out pages he'd messed up beyond repair in his sketchbook to use as kindling. He starts the fire (Rayla had needed to teach him, the first time they'd set up camp) and uses what little they have to set up bedding for all of them, and she cooks whatever she's able to hunt on the way, taking turns with Callum as they turn it slowly over the fire. They stay up long after Ezran is asleep, the weight of the world just a little heavier on the shoulders of two teenagers than it is on the two younger princes they're protecting. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they're mostly quiet, before they both agree that it's time to get some rest.

Either way, it's comfortable. Almost too comfortable. And if Rayla's learned anything, it's to never get *comfortable*. Never stay in a certain training routine long enough for it to get easy, never take the route with the softest terrain...

Never get close enough to feel secure with them.

It makes sense, in the context she learned it. No single person in a troupe is guaranteed to survive, and the easiest path is always the

easiest place to get caught.

So when Callum says, “Hey, I never got to ask you the last three questions,” the first night their routine is temporarily upended, Ezran already asleep with Bait and Zym in the room Lujanne has provided them, she almost welcomes the way it takes her off guard.

He doesn’t have to be out here; she’d taken it upon herself to patrol the area for a couple hours before bed, and would have just finished if not for Callum sitting at one of the benches outside, sketching. She’s not tired enough to deny him, though. “Questions?” she asks.

“On the boat. Before—”

“Before we nearly drowned in that waterfall, almost got eaten by that serpent, and I risked electrocution,” she remembers, but she says it with a slight, teasing smile. It all seems so long ago, now.

“...Sure,” Callum says, setting his sketchbook down. He pats the spot on the bench next to him and she sits down, because why not? Zym is happy and healthy, she’s beginning to get feeling back in her hand, and for once they’re in a fairly safe place. She’s in a better mood than she’s been in for a while, now. “So,” he begins, “what was your favourite subject in school?”

She looks at him skeptically. “You really want to talk about school?”

“Well?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t care much about school, to be honest. We’re only in school for a short time, just to see what role we might want to take in the village. But I’ve known for a long time, ever since I could think, that I wanted to be an assassin.” Her brow furrows slightly. “Although I guess I was too young to know what all it entailed. It’s easier to talk about killing someone, but the moment you have to...”

Callum smiles patiently at her. “That’s okay. So... you’re not sure if you want to be one anymore?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugs, not caring to mention that that’s technically a second question out of three. “I don’t know what else I’d do.”

“You can do pretty much everything,” he says. “I doubt it’d take you long to find something else.”

She smiles a little. “Not woodworking,” she says, and it catches his attention as he straightens, waiting for the followup explanation. “One of the only subjects I *did* like as a kid. But everything I made turned out to be kind of a monstrosity. Stopped liking it after I nearly stabbed myself with one of my ‘creations’.”

For a moment Rayla wonders why she had to bring up one of the few things she’s genuinely bad at, when Callum’s smile brightens. “Now I have to see all of them.”

“Too bad, they’ve probably all been thrown away,” she smirks. “What about you? What do they teach princes, anyway?”

Callum blows out a sigh, leaning back as he counts it all off on one hand. “Sword fighting, horseback riding, history, geography, public speaking, battle strategy, I think I took an etiquette class when I was really young? What else...?”

Rayla lets out a low whistle. “Some of that sounds really boring.”

“History was kinda fun,” he shrugs. “I don’t know. I already told you, I’m not great at any of that stuff.”

“Not even battle strategy? Your plan earlier was solid once we all knew what we were doing.”

He flushes a little. “What? No, that was just—I didn’t put a lot of time into it, and I guess we weren’t gonna get hurt anyway—”

“So you came up with a good plan on your toes and we all managed to get out without losing our minds out there.”

“I dunno,” he mumbles. “The only thing I was ever really good at was...”

They’re both quiet for a moment, the impact of the shattering Primal stone still ringing in their ears.

“I’m getting kinda tired,” he says, pushing himself up when she doesn’t reply. “Are you going to sleep anytime soon?”

“In a bit.”

“Okay.” He glances back at her with a tiny smile. “I still have two more questions left for later.”

Technically one, but... “Whatever you say, sleepy prince,” she replies with a wave of her hand.

She’s still smiling a little after he’s already gone back inside.

*

“What was your favourite thing to do as a kid?”

They’ve spent too long at the Moon Nexus, and she’s a little restless after dinner, but he follows her till they rest on one of the benches on the outskirts of the ruins. She picks at the moss that’s grown up the side, and has to appreciate the very non-subtle attempt at distracting her. If he knew what he was distracting her from, he might object—the boys are way too comfortable here—but she

figures one more half-day is fine before she insists that they leave. Callum sketches absentmindedly in his sketchbook beside her. It’s an outline of the ruins, and it looks good so far.

“Train,” she says simply. The scritchings noises of his charcoal pencil pause.

“Seriously?”

“Yes?” Rayla looks up, smiling a bit at the incredulous look on his face.

“Even when you were really young?”

“Even when I was three years old and they couldn’t even train me for real yet, so I had to settle with sticks that I’d found in the grass,” she almost brags. She wasn’t a prodigy for nothing after all.

“But that was still kind of playing,” he says, his expression softening.

“What?”

“They were pretending to train you because you were a toddler who looked up to her family. That’s actually pretty cute.”

Rayla flushes, looking back at the fire. “I hardly remember it,” she says quickly. “Besides, I was around ten when I finally started formal training, so.”

“So... other than training, or pretending to train, what did you like to do?”

“That’s your last question.”

“It is?”

“You had five, yeah? You asked me two, then technically you asked me two more earlier but I let you have a free one—”

“So why not just let me have another free one?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?”

“Because we’re friends and I like getting to know you?”

Rayla blinks. They are friends, but... “Do you always ask new friends millions of questions?” She’s curious now, still haltingly open. And for once, Callum pauses before he starts speaking again.

“I... don’t really know,” he confesses. “I’ve only ever had Claudia and Soren, and we knew each other basically our whole lives. And of course Ezran’s my friend, but that’s different too, because he’s my little brother, and...” He shrugs. “I don’t really know how to do this.”

“I don’t either,” she says quietly. “I don’t have that many friends either.” She has two now, but he doesn’t need to know that quite yet. She scoots a little closer to him, smiling. “I don’t mind it,” she says. “Not really. The questions, I mean. You can even ask one more if you want.”

He brightens a little, before taking another moment to think. Rayla watches as his expression turns to something more serious, and he says, “You don’t have to answer this one, but... Why didn’t you have a lot of friends growing up?”

Rayla casts her eyes down to her knees. “I don’t know. I was always more comfortable with my family, I suppose. And assassins aren’t supposed to have a lot of personal attachments. Some of the old poets say it’s a different kind of self-binding. If you make too many, and they don’t work out, you lose bits of yourself.”

“Oh. That’s... really depressing.”

“But, more practically, it’s just kind of a distraction. And saying goodbye before missions is messier if there are too many people to say goodbye to, you know?”

“That’s not any less depressing.”

Rayla lets out a rather undignified snort. “I mean, that’s the main reason. What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “Like, if I had to answer that question, I’d just say I had trouble fitting in.”

“I mean, there was that too. But fitting in is overrated, anyway.” Rayla leans back on the heels of her palms, remembering when she’d said it to Ezran. The nicest, sweetest boy who had also had too much trouble fitting in. What a strange world, pushing her together with two kids who had grown up possibly as lonely as she’d been, when they might have never even crossed paths.

“Maybe,” Callum considers. “But it’s nice when you fit with even a few other people. We don’t really need the rest of the world to like us at that point.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Is that what it’s like with Claudia and Soren?” she asks. He blinks, his expression faltering a little.

“It—well—” He smiles, but it seems strained. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

“I’ve just... With Claudia, it’s like, as much as I feel like I know her pretty well, I... always feel like I should know more?” There’s a pink tinge to his cheeks, and Rayla pretends not to notice it. “And Soren gets on me about how weak and soft I am, but that’s kind of just what he does, y’know, knocking me down at sparring and stuff. And he

calls me names. Like step-prince. Which is true, but—

“Step-prince?”

“Yeah, like... ‘Cause Harrow’s not really my dad.”

There’s an ache in her left wrist, and she flexes out her hand a little. She can’t tell him *that* right now. Instead, she says, “Callum, that’s not okay.”

He stops sketching and glances up at her. “What?”

“It’s not okay that he treats you like that. You’re not weak and you may be the king’s stepson but that doesn’t make his place in your life any less important. That doesn’t make *you* any less important. Even just joking about it like that isn’t okay.” She lets out a little huff. “You say that it should be an easy fit, yeah? Well, friends also shouldn’t make you feel like you *don’t* fit. Ever.”

Callum smiles a little. “For someone who didn’t have a lot of friends growing up, you seem to know a lot about it.”

“I know what’s right, and how to treat people.”

“Maybe that’s why we fit.”

The comment takes her off guard, and her cheeks grow warm in spite of herself. “What?”

“I dunno. It’s easy with you. I’m not saying that Claudia and Soren aren’t still my friends—they absolutely are, but—it’s just always been easy to talk to you. Even when you were chasing me around the castle with your swords.”

Rayla chuckles softly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve only ever really been like that with Ezran, and he’s my brother. And since you’re not my little brother, I can actually... talk to you about stuff that maybe I can’t with him. It’s only been a week—”

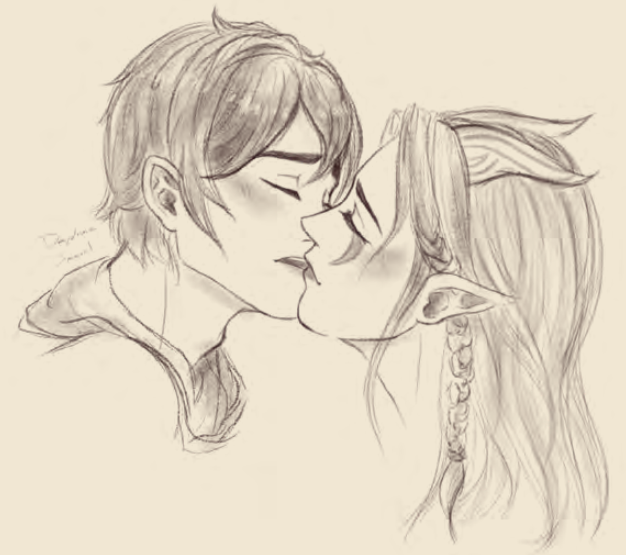
“Ten days.”

“—ten days,” he corrects, smiling a little, “and I already feel like we can talk about pretty much anything now. I guess what I’m saying is... I don’t know if friendship always has to be like fitting in with someone easily, but I’m glad that I get to know that exists, because I met you. And that Ezran gets to know that too.”

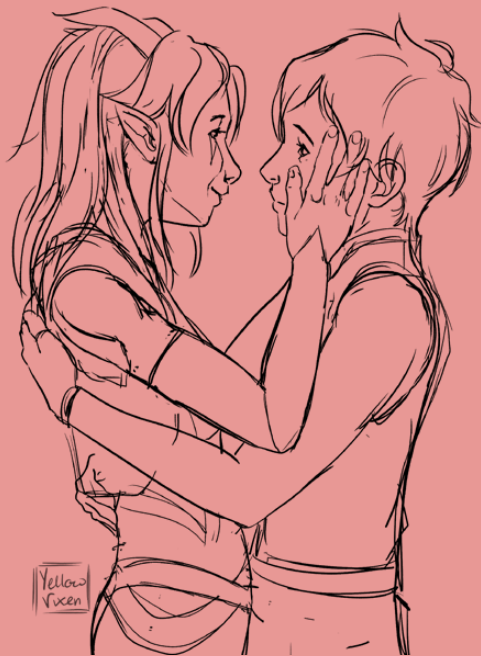
Rayla turns her head to keep the way she smiles unbidden from view. “I’m glad I get to know what that’s like, too,” she says quietly.

And weeks later, when she finds herself on top of an ambler and sees the way his hand envelops hers, her fingers snug between his, she thinks that maybe everything about them can fit this perfectly, too.

*She's not a fool.
What she's telling
you is true.*



FALLING



Dear Callum,

I'm hard to resist, I know.

In all seriousness, I think I would have loved you, too. A part of me. A small one. I'm just not good at this, yet. Or ever was, I guess. I don't know how to do this, but I know I love you. And I know you'll tell me you love me every day, but you already convinced me when we were falling together from the Spire. You know, the one you jumped off to save my life, nevermind that you could have died, too? You dumb selfless prince. My prince.

As scary as that day was, is it weird to say all I ever want to do some days is fall with you? Nothing will ever compare to that day, I think. At least, not the part where I knew for a fact that you loved me, too.

This is so sappy.

Love,
Rayla



























WHEN YOU'RE NOT LOOKING

by Little-Red-Alchemist-of-Doom

Rayla's voice made its way into Callum's consciousness, but not her words. He heard her say *something*, definitely, but his focus was elsewhere: the storm raging just a few miles away that was already pouring rain down onto him.

Yeah," he replied passively. "I agree." It didn't really matter what he was replying to. He just needed to focus on that storm...

It was only once she entered his field of vision that she drew his attention.

"I know that face," she groaned, but he recognized the teasing lilt in her tone. "That's the dumb idea face."

He offered a sheepish smile. After just a couple of weeks, she could read him so well. Even he wouldn't classify his idea as a smart one.

A flash of lightning struck above the nearby mountain, briefly illuminating half of Rayla's face - her smirk, the light in her eyes gaining an electric spark from the storm. Even with her hair completely matted down with rain, even looking disheveled and annoyed at being caught in the rain while on the water, she looked as beautiful as ever.

Beautiful. That wasn't a word that his mind had used for her before. When did that shift happen? Not that it wasn't accurate; he wasn't

blind. Anyone would have to admit that Rayla truly was beautiful. It didn't matter that she was travel-worn and clearly wanted anything other than to be on a boat in the rain. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. He could look at her for ages, her face softly lit by distant lightning.

His stomach lurched at the thought.

Turning his attention back to the storm, he explained, "Every time the lightning strikes, I can feel something." That particular lightning strike had definitely elicited a... stronger reaction from him than others had, but that didn't change the electricity he felt in his bones, wanting to manifest as magic.

"Yeah, me too," Rayla replied, sarcasm dripping from each word. "It feels good to not be struck by lightning."

Part of him wanted to laugh. Even in her misery, she was still making jokes. But he found himself shaking his head to explain, "No, I mean — it feels like it did when I used the Fulminis spell." It was a stupid idea. He didn't need Rayla to tell him that, but he shared it anyway. "Maybe if I'm brave enough to go into it, and face the storm, that's how I'll make the connection."

She didn't miss a beat in firing back. "Or it'll blow you up until you're dead!"

It was a possibility, definitely. His idea was *stupid*, and reckless, and dangerous. If he went out there, he might not come back.

He would come back, though. He had to. There was a mission to finish, and he had Ezran to take care of. And he had these new thoughts about Rayla to sort out. He wouldn't die before he could at least sort out how he felt.

*

As though it wasn't already going to be difficult enough to convince Callum that going *directly into a storm that could kill him* was a bad idea, Zym started prancing around in the rain, soaking in every bit of it and gazing up at the thick blanket of clouds.

"See?" Callum said, gesturing to him. "Zym gets it. He can feel it too."

Of course Zym gets it, Rayla stopped herself from snapping. He's a *dragon*. The humans had literally called his father *Thunder*. If anyone was supposed to 'feel something' when lightning struck, it was Zym. Not Callum the human. Not her. She wasn't a mage, much less a sky mage. She shouldn't have felt anything when lightning struck.

But just a moment ago, when it lit up his face, and she saw *fire* in his green eyes, a sort of determination and softness she hadn't seen on him before...she definitely felt something then. But what was it?

Ezran scooped Zym up and asked, "You really wanna go out there, don't you?"

That was enough to snap Rayla out of her trance. She jumped to insist, "Ohh, no, no, no.." Turning on Callum, she told him, "It's one thing to stupidly risk your own stupid human life—" Okay, maybe that was a little harsh. "—but I am not going to let you risk the life of the future king of the dragons."

"He is a storm dragon," Ezran pointed out, as though Callum wasn't signing a death warrant for himself *and* Zym. "He'll be safe."

Callum unslung his sketchbook from across his chest and held it out to Rayla. Glaring at him, she snatched it from his hands, but didn't stop the brothers as Ezran passed Zym to Callum. If he was going to do this, then it was his choice, but that didn't stop anger from welling up inside her, mixing with an anxiety that she couldn't suppress. There he went, risking his life. Yes, she understood how

important magic was to him. But it was never going to be more important than his very life. How would she and Ezran even go on if he didn't come back?

As he made his way toward the mountain, she shouted after him, "If you die out there, I swear, I'll kill you!" If there was even anything of him left to kill.

Her heart sank.

What was that even about? Never before had she reacted so strongly to Callum being in danger. Life-threatening situations were normal — had grown to be expected, even — on this journey. They'd saved each other's lives countless times already, and yet, she couldn't tear herself away from the railing on the deck of the ship, watching Callum's back growing ever smaller in the distance.

He would come back. He *had* to. If he didn't, all would be lost. Not just for the world, because she wasn't sure she and Ez could get Zym to Xadia without him. But maybe also within her.

*

"Magic is *hard*," Callum groaned, kicking a stone as he and Zym made their way up the mountain. "Do I have to just, like, keep guessing things that *might* trigger a connection to the sky? Like, I dunno, getting struck by lightning?"

Part of him was already considering turning back. What good would any of this do if he didn't live through it? It was a risky gamble, probably much riskier than he could afford, but so was everything he did anymore. It was a risky gamble to even think about what it was he felt back when the lightning struck and suddenly his entire consciousness, just for a moment, was full of Rayla.

Crossing his arms, Callum murmured, "It's already hard enough to try and figure out magic when there aren't a bunch of... new,

jumbled-up feelings."

Zym chittered at him. If nothing else, at least he would be able to talk some things through with someone who wasn't going to go blabbing to Rayla, since Zym literally couldn't.

"When did all this even start?" he wondered. "I mean, I've heard people say that these things tend to happen 'when you're not looking,' and I *wasn't*, I've been pretty focused on the mission. But shouldn't I at least have a sense of when it started? This isn't like how it felt with Claudia. Is it supposed to feel so different? Is it supposed to be this confusing, this...this *scary*? She's my friend, Zym, I'd go so far as to say she's my best friend. But that's supposed to be it. She...she's good. She protects you, and me, and Ezran. And she's brave, and heroic, and honestly, *really* cool. But that's not all, she's—she's kind, and smart, and she might be a fighter, but all she really wants is peace. She's gentle, and she loves with all of her heart, but she tries not to show it, and it's really endearing, and gosh, when did I first notice the way light reflects in her eyes like that? Has she always looked like that? Has she always looked at *me* like that?" Stopping dead in his tracks, Callum pointed an accusatory finger at Zym. "You can't tell anyone about this. Not even Ezran or Bait. Got it?"

Zym yipped in what sounded like a yes, so Callum let out a relieved sigh. It wasn't his plan to pour his heart out to a dragon, especially with the knowledge that Ezran could understand him. Nobody needed to know any of this. At least not until he figured it all out himself.

And once he did, Rayla would be the first to know.

*

Rayla paced the deck of the *Ruthless*. She couldn't care less about the rain. She hardly even knew if anyone else was up on the deck with her. She simply paced, looking a little too frequently in the direction

Callum had gone. *He had to come back.* And when he did, she wasn't sure if she was going to punch him in the gut or do something she might regret. Something that could fracture their friendship.

The concept of getting as close to him as she wanted scared her almost as much as the thought of him not coming back. She couldn't let herself get carried away. The wall between them had been gradually coming down since she told the boys about her binding, but she had to make sure that she still kept some form of distance. Getting any closer could be dangerous — not only for their little team, but for the world.

Or maybe that was just what she was trying to convince herself of. Whatever kept her from doing anything stupid that she would regret, she supposed.

"They'll be okay, Rayla," Ezran sighed.

Rayla jumped. She hadn't even realized that Ezran was there with her.

Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms and sat by the mast. "Depends on how stupid they decide to be." She glared out toward the mountain. "I should've gone with them. Your idiot brother'll die without me."

His exasperation was palpable. "You've never been *this* worried about him before."

As Ezran spoke, Villads came up from below deck, Berto perched on his shoulder. Rayla tensed, avoiding eye contact.

"I didn't care quite so much about him before we became friends," she admitted. Maybe that was vague enough to keep them in the dark about what was going on in her head.

"Ahh." Villads gave a sagely nod. "You know, Rayla, a little bout 'a

wisdom I can give you is that these things happen when you're not lookin'. That's how it was for me and me wife Ruth."

She raised an eyebrow. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it always tends to be in the little things when you fall in love."

Jumping up from where she was sitting, she rushed over to the railing again to face away from them. What was he talking about, falling *in love*? That wasn't it at all. Still, she made sure to hide her face from Ezran — she was no doubt flushed.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "He's my friend and I don't want him to die."

When Bait croaked, Ezran translated, "Bait says that he knows Callum will come back. He's smart. He'll keep himself and Zym safe."

"He better prove it then," Rayla muttered.

Callum *was* smart. His plans were usually great, no matter how loathe she was to admit it. Part of her knew that he would be okay. He wasn't going to let himself die. Not when there was a mission as important as theirs at stake. Not when he had the future of the world scampering along next to him.

It didn't mean she wasn't going to worry. And it certainly didn't do her any favors to have all of these new thoughts in her head.

What did Villads mean, talking about love? Sure, Callum was smart. He was funny, and sweet, and sure, maybe it made her heart flutter a bit when he offered to go around the bay instead of sail across it, and maybe his bed head was really cute, and maybe she admired his determination to learn magic, and—

...Okay. Maybe there was something she was avoiding thinking

about. It wasn't entirely her fault that she hadn't thought about it until now, though. What else was she supposed to do? It had happened when she wasn't looking, and now it was impossible to look away.

*

As they made their way back to the ship, Zym in Callum's arms, Callum quietly said, "Thanks for sticking with me, buddy. Sorry you got struck by lightning."

Zym gave a quiet yip and looked up with a smile. He wasn't hurt, it seemed, just a little out of it.

They were quiet for a few minutes. The rain let up by the time they reached the base of the mountain, and the leftover fear from nearly being struck by lightning was finally dissipating from him.

But with that phasing out of his mind came the other worries he had pushed aside for the sake of magic.

"She *told* me it was stupid," Callum grumbled, holding Zym just a little tighter. "Rayla told me so, and I didn't listen. And now I have to go back there and face her empty-handed and with the knowledge that I should have taken her advice and just...waited the storm out with the rest of them."

Zym gave a contrary squeak with a little dragon scowl.

"No? You think it was a *good* idea to run into a storm and nearly get us both killed?"

He rolled his eyes and curled up in Callum's arms.

"I mean, I've been stupid before, and so has she. We're okay, so she'll forgive me. I guess I just..." He sucked in a breath. "I guess I'm a little nervous to see her with these new feelings? I'd rather ignore them,

but I'm not sure if I'll be able to. She's my best friend, and I don't want to mess that up."

Zym didn't reply, and Callum couldn't blame him. After what just happened on the mountain, there was no way he had the patience to listen to Callum's worries about his relationship with Rayla.

He wished he had noticed it sooner, or had been able to recognize the signs of falling for her. If he had noticed earlier, and figured out that this was completely different from how he thought he felt about Claudia, then maybe he wouldn't feel so off-kilter about it now. If he had noticed the way her tone changed when she stayed with him as he cried over the loss of his father, or how brightly she smiled when things went their way, or how much she loved doing stupid things like Human Rayla, just to make Ezran laugh...maybe he wouldn't be in this situation. Maybe he would know how to react, and be able to adjust his behavior.

But maybe he didn't need to think too hard about it.

As soon as Ezran and Rayla were in sight on the deck of the *Ruthless*, Callum saw them both brighten, even from this distance, and his heart swelled. They both started running toward him and Zym, and a kind of mean idea entered his head.

When they reached him, Ezran immediately asked, "Callum! What happened?"

Keeping his tone quiet and remorseful, Callum explained, "We went into the heart of the storm, and Zym...he got struck by lightning."

Just as he expected, Ezran cried out, and Rayla gasped in horror.

He let a beat pass before smiling and saying, "...But I think he's okay!"

*

As Rayla let out a sigh of relief, she nearly wanted to smack Callum for scaring her, but elected not to do that as he handed Zym off to a joyful Ezran.

Despite the relief and how proud Callum was of his stupid joke, she could tell that something was off. Ezran and Zym headed back to the ship, but Rayla took a few steps toward Callum and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I feel stupid,” he admitted, not looking at her before he turned his back. “You were right.”

Her chest clenched at his downtrodden tone. “Callum...”

“I could have gotten Zym killed,” he continued before she could say anything more. “I put us both in danger. And worst of all, when we were right there, in the center of the storm, I thought I wanted this badly enough, but in the end...I didn’t have the guts.”

He said it like it was a bad thing. Like he should have been an idiot and died out there. Like he should have risked his life instead of coming back to her and Ezran.

Everything within Rayla bubbled to the surface. She had never been so happy to see him alive, magic or no magic. He came back to her, and that was what was important. He was here, and she wasn’t going to let him get that close to slipping away from her ever again.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and gently turned him around to face her. And oh, it was so nice to see his face, his disheveled hair, his wonderful green eyes, and for just a moment, she feared that the impulse to kiss him might be just a little too strong.

Luckily, she managed to simply say, “Good,” and pull him into a tight hug. He was rigid for just a moment before wrapping his arms around her back as well.

She nearly melted into him. If she could, she would have stayed like that forever, her head in the crook of his neck, his arms firmly around her, letting her know that he wasn’t going anywhere. He would stay by her side, whether she was looking or not.

SHRINKING SPACES

by Jellyjay

It's not a *crush*.

Rayla likes him, yeah, and he's been a good friend these past couple of weeks—better, even, than the (*very*) few friends she'd ever had growing up—and she'll admit that she thinks he's sweet, and considerate, and kind of a dork (but not in a bad way), but it's not *crush*, and she's not *twelve*. Callum's just... a nice guy, and they've spent almost every waking moment with each other since that night on the tower, so it's completely reasonable that they've grown *fond* of each other, but that's *all*.

They're *friends*. *Best* friends.

It's not weird to be wary of the space between them. *Normal* friends are wary of that. Personal space isn't that different concept between humans and elves, and making sure he's comfortable in his own space is absolutely something *normal* friends do. It's just—sometimes—Rayla finds herself closing it.

By accident, of course. Never on purpose. A playful prod of his cheek here; the brush of an elbow there; a hug when she thinks he needs it—nothing untoward. Certainly nothing that *means* anything, and when she realizes she's doing it, she steps back as subtly as elvenly possible and pretends that it's fine, she's fine, that it's not *her* breath caught in her throat, that it's just—the wind, or something. In any case, he does it too.

He helps her up and sits closer to her than strictly necessary and sometimes his fingers linger for a little while longer than they should, and it fills Rayla's chest with an amount of warmth she doesn't *really* want to have to explain—but that's the point, right?

It's a *completely normal thing* to be wary of those little touches, because they're *friends*, and the—er, *affection* isn't, like, unwelcome, but still. That space is important. That space is personal.

That space is the last thing keeping Rayla from admitting to herself that she *might* have a crush, and it's really important that it stays there because this is definitely *not* a crush.

It's just. A lot easier for it not to be.

They're just friends.

And the space between them is there to stay.

*

It starts the day he collapses from his use of Dark Magic.

To be fair, it probably started long before that—and by long, Rayla doesn't mean very long at all. They've only known each other a couple of weeks, but the little flutters are hard to ignore.

He'd done it to save her life. The Dark Magic, she means. When she'd gone down there, she'd fully intended to die, if she'd needed to, and of course that didn't sit right by Callum—of *course* he'd risk everything to help, even if there wasn't really anything he could do except—

It still makes her shudder. Dark Magic doesn't suit him. He's too gentle and too sweet and, in some ways, too *ambitious* for it, but he'd done it to *save her* and she'd been so *mad* at him about it because it

was stupid; it was dangerous; it's so against everything he stands for and she's just—

"Not worth it?"

Callum frowns at her. It's quiet without Ezran, and it's barely been half a day, but they miss him already. That jagged ridges of the Breach are well in view now, and if they make it by sundown, crossing should be easy, but he stops her, a hand on her wrist, confusion in his brow.

Rayla presses her lips together. This obviously isn't the first time they've ever touched—hours ago, she'd had both of her hands on his face; had held him closer than she'd ever intended and had almost admitted feelings to him that she hasn't fully admitted to *herself* yet—but she swallows anyway and tugs her hand back, suddenly afraid of the proximity that should perhaps be familiar.

"I'm not," she says. Her lips are dry. Her throat feels raw. She can't look at him without feeling heat in her face. "It was a risk and you knew it. Our mission is to get Zym home, and if something had happened to you, if—if—"

If the spell hadn't worked—if he hadn't woken up—if he'd come to help her and it was all for nothing—

"How would I have done that without *you* exactly?" He's still frowning at her, and the confusion is gone and replaced by something else. Something... kinda *mad*.

He steps towards her, his lips a grim, unimpressed line. Rayla tries to step back, but she stumbles against the craggy surface of the Breach. She only doesn't trip because he catches her wrists once more.

Rayla swallows as he steadies her. "Y-you could have done it. You

would have. If anything had happened at to me, you would—"

"*How?*" he demands again. "Ez and I would never have made it as far as we did without you. Rayla, I know, like, *two spells*, there's no *way*—"

"You would have found one," says Rayla quickly. She tugs her hand out of his grasp and ducks her head to hide the redness in her cheeks. "You're smart, and brave, and resourceful, and Callum, you don't *need* me. Not really. You would have made it."

He scowls at her. Even Zym looks affronted by the way she puts it, but it's not as though it's untrue. A human forging their own connection to the Sky Primal is unheard of, but Callum had done so against all odds and expectations. Maybe she's a little biased, but from what she's seen, Callum can do *anything* if he cares enough about it, and she has no doubt that he can complete their mission on his own—if he has to.

"Please tell me you don't honestly believe that." He takes another step. He's shorter than her by an inch—a couple, if she counts her horns as part of her height—but the severity of his frown makes him seem taller than he is. "Rayla—I don't know what makes you think I can do this without you, but I *can't*. You're not a—a guide, or a bodyguard. You're... my *friend*, and I *need* you with me on this." He's closer now. His hand shifts from her wrist to grasp at her fingers, his touch firm and warm against her skin.

Rayla's breath catches, and the only reason she doesn't pull away from him is because she's forgotten how to move altogether. He's close. Too close. Her pulse is so rapid that he *must* feel the way it flutters in her wrist, and the last time the space between them had shrunk to this, she'd almost told him—

But then, would that be so bad? He obviously doesn't mind this distance—or rather, the lack of it. What if she just *allowed* herself to

admit—

His frown falters. He looks away. The warmth of his fingers disappears almost as fast as it appeared to begin with, and it's like he's just noticed that there's only a hand's width between them. "Sorry, I -uh—" He flushes. Zym chirps curiously on his shoulder, but Callum shakes his head. "I just—I don't know how to do this without you," he murmurs. "You *have* to know that. And—I dunno—maybe you're right. Maybe I'd find a way, but... it wouldn't be right if we didn't do it together."

He cuts himself off awkwardly. Rayla wonders if he wants to say something else, but he keeps his lips pressed shut and his eyes on the stones at their feet.

She lets out the breath, relief in her smile, disappointment in her chest. "You're sweet," she says finally, without quite looking at him. "C'mon. We're almost there." She turns on her heel, determined to slip back into that easy silence—that comfortable air that she's grown used to with that space between them back in place—and to let this conversation end at last. But—she pauses.

"For what it's worth," she adds without thinking. "I don't really know how to do this without you, either."

She knows without looking that he smiles at that.

*

It takes them longer to cross the Breach than Rayla anticipates. The sun rises. The runes on the Moonstone Path disappear. It's only thanks to Zym that they make it across to begin with, and in her *joy*, Rayla *forgets* about the space—and from the way he throws himself at her, she thinks Callum might have too.

Does he think about it as much as she does, she wonders?

Does he distance himself the same way to keep the same feelings at bay?

No. She doesn't think so.

She's not sure if that makes her relieved or disappointed.

*

Then they come across Sol Regem. The whole time, she can't help it. They could *die* here, but it's strangely comforting to be near him—to joke with him; to prod him playfully; to—

She doesn't call it *flirting* because that's not what it is. *Flirting* has an active component; *flirting* means she's actually vying for his attention—which she's not. She's... making light of an otherwise dire situation. She's coping with the fact that they might *die* with jokes and silliness. Honestly, it feels like they need it. Zym is scared enough for both of them, and there's too much at stake here to let their fear get the better of them too.

But then Sol Regem addresses them. Then Rayla tries to reason with him, and for one, shining moment, it feels like he might let them pass. But—

"Not the filthy human who cowers nearby."

Rayla seizes up. Her arms tighten around Zym, and from his hiding place, she hears Callum sigh.

"It's okay," he says, resigned. "You go on without me."

"No! Callum, we're so *close*!" She ducks back to meet him as he emerges from behind the wind carved rock formations he'd been taking cover under. Something's pulling in her chest. She doesn't know how to explain it, really. Only that the idea of moving forward

without him feels... *wrong*. Completely and utterly wrong.

“Rayla, getting Zym to Xadia is all that matters. Just... tell the Dragon Queen I helped a little.” He offers her a grim smile. A sad smile. One that means more than she understands. “I’ll... go back home.”

Sol Regem cackles. The sound rumbles in Rayla’s chest. “Home? No. There are two choices. You all die, or just the wretched, evil *human* dies.”

No. No. The fear in Rayla’s system falters, and it’s replaced, instead, by something else—something... angry—protective?—and *determined*. She passes Zym back to Callum and squares her shoulders, and Sol Regem is huge and powerful and terrifying, but she doesn’t care. Callum will *not* die here. Not by this dragon’s bitter, unfounded hatred of all things human. Not if she can help it.

“I agree with you, Sol Regem,” she says coldly. “*Some* humans are evil. But not this one. Not Callum. The only reason the Dragon Prince is alive is because of this human. He left his home and his family to save the egg, and he sacrificed *everything* so Azymondias could be born.” She turns for a moment to look at him, catching the look on his face, the disbelief that she believes in him so much, and she *almost* hesitates. But she steels herself, because this is the truth, and Sol Regem needs to hear it. “He’s noble,” she continues. “And true. When we met, he could have had me captured or killed, but he *didn’t*, because without knowing me, or anything about me, he saw past human hatred and did what he knew was right. He’s smart, and kind, and brave, and he’s—”

She swallows. There’s *too much* truth in this now, and her voice trembles because she’s not sure anymore about where she’d meant to go with this. Is this still about convincing Sol Regem to let them pass? She doesn’t think so.

“He’s my friend,” she manages at last. “My *best* friend.” And then she’s holding her hand out to Callum, and Callum takes it—his palm warm against hers, their fingers intertwined in a way that’s more than just *best-friend-y* and she knows it. This isn’t for Sol Regem. Sol Regem can’t see, so it doesn’t matter that they’re holding hands like this at all, but it’s comfort. Solidarity. A reminder that they’re in this *together*, and they make it past him together, or they don’t make it past him at all.

“So please,” she says, to Sol Regem this time. “Allow him to pass into Xadia and help me take the Dragon Prince home. Because... I don’t think I can do it without him.”

Oh, how she’s fallen.

This isn’t a *crush*.

It never was.

*

It doesn’t work, of course. Sol Regem is too stubborn and too full of hate for something as simple as *reason* to work. So they go back to sneaking, and Callum gives her his scarf so she can lead him away while he and Zym cross the canyon. Callum calls it ‘the worst idea she’s ever had’ and—well—yeah, it is. But he’ll be safe, and that’s all that matters.

She puts it on and he fixes it, and for a second—a second that drags on far too long—they catch each other’s eye.

It’s all there, in his face. The *Please be careful, the You’re my best friend too, the I need you with me on this*—and suddenly his face is too close to hers, and all she wants is for him to be even nearer still.

She looks away.

Moon and Stars help me, she thinks to herself. *I'm done for.*

*

They stop for the night in a cave at the edge of Sol Regem's canyon. It's not so dark yet, but they'd come so close to failing their mission—to dying—to *losing each other*—that this rest feels well deserved. The Moonshadow Forest is only a little way ahead now anyway, and if they make good time, they'll be home before dusk.

The thought makes Rayla jittery. It's only been a few weeks, but it feels like a lifetime. She's certainly not the same person she was when she left, and so much has changed since then that she's almost nervous about what her people might come to think. The elves in the Silvergrove don't have a particularly friendly idea of humans, and the idea that Callum might be treated with hostility of any sort raises her hackles and puts tension in her shoulders.

"You gotta stop doing that."

She blinks. Zym's all settled now, but Callum's still wide awake. His eyes are bright, shining with an excitement that can only be because they've finally made it across the border, but his smile seems... *muted*. He drops into the space next to her, probably a little closer than he means, but he doesn't move. He just nudges her elbow gently and looks out over Moonshadow Forest. "I mean, I know you did it so Zym and I could get across, but we talked about this remember?"

Rayla scoffs and nudges him back. "*You* don't get to lecture me about being self-sacrificing. You were ready to *die*."

"Touché, I guess," Callum laughs. "But no more of that though, okay? From either of us." He touches her hand. There's hesitance in it, like he's testing the limits of their... *affection*, even after she'd gone ahead and held his in a show of solidarity that Sol Regem couldn't even see. But his fingers close over hers, in the end, and she finds herself

leaning into his touch in spite of her better judgement.

"No more of that," she murmurs, returning the gesture.

*

They start towards Moonshadow Forest the next morning.

If Rayla's being totally honest, then there are *definitely* easier ways to get to the Silvergrove than the route that she takes him, but Callum's just so *excited* to be here—so wide-eyed and curious and eager—that it just seems cruel to deny him this. His joy is infectious. Catching. And though she's used to the melodaisies, and the flatulillies, and the great jacaranda seeds that provide the quickest (funnest) path to the lower forest, she finds herself laughing with him like it's her first time along this path too.

It's less funny when they get to the ground, but that's Rayla's fault. He hadn't quite had a grip when the seed came free, and he'd slid towards her and into her arms as they'd spun, around and around and around, until they came to a stop on the loamy forest floor.

"Sorry," he'd said, red and flustered. "I d-I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay!" She'd *winked*. "It was a bumpy ride."

That was a couple of hours ago now but she's still agonizing over it. She can't *really* have said that, but she *did*, and, oh, gods, she hopes Callum doesn't think it was weird. It's the first thing she can call *actively flirting* with him, and she can make all the excuses she wants, but there was no reason she had to *wink*, or smirk so coyly, or enjoy the proximity of his arms around her, his chest pressed to hers, as much as she had.

They'd agreed that there'd be no more secrets between them—not out loud, but after the thing with the death of his stepfather, Rayla,

at least, had promised to herself that she wouldn't keep secrets from him again, but *this*—

This *one* feels necessary. It's got the potential to be horrendously complicated at worst, and a heck of a distraction at best, but it certainly won't be a secret for much longer if this space keeps disappearing.

But *gods*, she *likes* being near him.

She likes it a *lot*.

In her heart, she hopes he likes it too, but she hopes *more* that he hasn't caught on yet (especially if he doesn't).

*

She kisses him in the Midnight Desert.

He's not the most prepared for it. He's not really prepared for it at all, and the very thought of it still puts red in Rayla's cheeks and heat in her ears. In all fairness, it's been an emotionally taxing past couple of days. Her return to the Silvergrove wasn't exactly the homecoming she thought it would be, and in between finding out that Runaan and the others never made it home and her own self-loathing, it'd been easy to mistake Callum's praises for... something more.

She'd been upset.

She'd been vulnerable.

She's furious at herself now for allowing herself to be either. The night is dark and Zym is *gone*, and Moon and Stars know this should be the last thing on her mind, but the memory plays in her head relentlessly, and it's a struggle to think about anything else.

They sit by the Wonderwall, staring out into the rest of the desert, spaced far enough apart that it's noticeable. Awkward. They've grown so used to each other that it's comforting to feel the brush of his elbow against hers; to know without looking that the other is *there* and nearby, but being *nearer* feels like it might be worse right now. The sensation of his lips against her own is still fresh in Rayla's mind, and gods, it'd been *so nice* to think about—to believe, even just for a moment, that he might like her the way she likes him—

But she'd been naive to even consider it.

"Hey, y'know, um—" Callum clears his throat, his voice strangled and squeaking in odd places. "I know we said we weren't going to talk about it but—"

"We're *not*," snaps Rayla. She sets her jaw and glares determinedly at the black sand beyond the barrier of the Wonderwall. She's been vulnerable enough for one night, and she doesn't care that it's *Callum* and that he just wants to help. She's not *weak*. And she closes herself off to him in an effort to prove it to herself.

"I just—" He swallows and glances at her from the corner of his eye, a tinge of pink in his cheeks visible even in the pale moonlight. "I-I meant what I said. You are amazing and I hate that—that you think of yourself as anything less."

It's not what she thought he'd say. Rayla tears her eyes away from the desert, the stiffness in her shoulders faltering just a little, her lips pressed together tightly because she's not sure how to respond.

Callum sucks in a breath. He looks like he wants to say something. An apology, maybe? No, not quite. Rayla's almost afraid of it—his rejection of her advances was clear enough and she doesn't need his feelings spelled out for her any more than they already are—but he doesn't say anything, in the end. He only shuffles towards her, reducing the space between their shoulders to something more

reasonable—something more *comfortable*—the sand shifting quietly under his weight.

“I didn’t say those things just to make you feel better,” he says quietly. “I mean. I did, but it’s more than that. You’re my best friend, Rayla. I hate that you don’t see yourself the way I do.”

Rayla hesitates, because they’re coming close to their earlier conversation all over again, and she’s not sure she can do this a second time when she knows he doesn’t think of her like *that*. She already doesn’t know how to act about this. She’s not even really sure what he expects her to say. “How should I see myself?” she asks, grudgingly.

“Definitely not as someone worth rejecting,” Callum tells her quietly. He takes another breath. Sharper this time. And when he looks at her, there’s something... else in his eyes. “Listen. About before—”

Rayla stops him there. “We agreed,” she snarls, turning her eyes back to the desert.

“But—”

“*No.*”

He makes a face, pleading, *desperate* to salvage the situation, to *explain*—but Rayla squares her shoulders and sets her jaw.

They’re not talking about this. They never will.

She shifts against the sand, and the space between them feels bigger than it ever has before.

*

The night drags on. They don’t talk much. Twice, Callum looks like he wants to try again, but her refusal to discuss it—*any* of it—is resolute.

When the sun finally, *finally* peers over the horizon, Rayla makes the decision to very maturely pretend it didn’t happen at all, even as Callum climbs hesitantly onto the back of Ethari’s shadowpaw, too close to its tail to be comfortable or *safe* but too uncertain about where they stand to sit any closer to her. He’s not a very graceful rider to begin with, and he slips and and slides and almost falls off four times before Rayla grows sick of his squirming and groans.

“Will you stop moving around?” she snaps.

Callum winces. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I’m just—trying to find a good position. Oops!” He slips again and only manages to stay on by digging his fingers into the Shadowpaw’s saddle. “See? It’s tricky!”

Rayla rolls her eyes at him. She turns her head, eyebrows furrowed together in a frown that’s one-hundred percent *done* with his ridiculousness, and huffs. “Just hold onto me.”

He flushes, still dangling off the edge of the saddle, still struggling to climb back on, and looks away. “Oh, I mean, I guess I could do that? If you don’t think that would be...”

“If I don’t think that would be *what?*”

“Weird?”

The memory flashes in her mind once more: the honesty of his smile, the adoration in his eyes, the way she’d kissed him and the way he’d reacted—

“You’re already weird!” she says, determined to forget it’d ever happened at all. “*Super* weird. Just hold on.”

“Uh—okay!” he says. *Declares*. “Sure! Sure, not weird. Putting my arm around you seems— *very* normal! I’m just gonna do... *that*.”

His arms come to a rest around her waist. His hands clasp together over her stomach. His breath ghosts over her ear.

Rayla grows stiff under his hold. This was... less awkward in her head, but the fact that she’d kissed him is still fresh in her mind no matter how much she pretends it isn’t, and it’s clearly still fresh in his, too. But that’s not the weird part. The weird part is how much she’d *missed* it. His touch. His warmth.

She swallows thickly and tries not to think about it.

*

At some point, the adrenaline gets to her.

They climb the ambler’s leg together. Confront Nyx together. Rescue Zym *together*. And after things settle—after they rescue Nyx, too, and after they’re back on the ambler and on their way out of the desert—Callum kisses *her*.

Part of her is furious at him. How could he let her *think* he didn’t think of her that way? How could he let her think they were just *friends*? How could he let her *agonize* over it for an *entire day* without saying anything when, this whole time, he’d felt the same way?

“You didn’t let me,” he tells her. They’re leaning against the back of the ambler’s saddle, her legs thrown over his, his arm tucked around her waist. It’s late, and Nyx is sitting on the ambler’s other saddle—the one on its head—obviously reluctant to be around them, which is fair, Rayla thinks. There are a lot of feelings to air out here, and personally, she’d rather they had the time to talk about it between themselves without a stranger’s prying ears.

“I didn’t *let* you?”

“You didn’t!” says Callum, his tone playful and bright. The green of his eyes shines happily in the starlight, and Rayla falls for him all over again because of it. “I wanted to say something—in the Oasis, when we were waiting for the sunrise. Every time I tried, you kind of... shut me down.”

It’s not like it’s untrue. Rayla’d been so determined to *never* talk about it again that she’d refused to even look at him whenever he looked like he wanted to. It’s funny *now*, of course, but back then...

She shakes her head. “Sorry,” she offers. “I was...”

“I get it,” says Callum. “I just... I didn’t say those things *just* so you would kiss me. They’re true. You *are* the most amazing person I’ve ever met, and—I needed you to know that, outside of any other feelings, y’know?”

“I get that,” whispers Rayla. She pauses, her four slender fingers finding their way into the spaces of his five. “How—how long?”

“I dunno.” Callum breathes in and lifts their joined hands to his lips to press a kiss against her thumb. “That day, when we had to cross the canyon and not get roasted by Sol Regem? I think that was the day I realized I needed you. For—for more than just this. I think at some point, I just... always assumed you’d be there. With me. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.” She’d started doing that too. She has no idea what the future might hold, but she’d assumed he would be there, and that they would face it together, and that made it... *okay*.

“What about you?”

She shrugs. “That day you did Dark Magic to save me and that

dragon,” she tells him. “I almost told you then. When you got sick and you couldn’t breathe. I didn’t even really get it myself just yet, but... I thought you were going to *die*, and I couldn’t not...”

“Is that what you were going to say when you...?”

“Yeah.”

Callum laughs. “Ah, man,” he says. “Wish I’d woken up later.”

She scowls at him. “*Don’t even joke.*”

“I’m *kidding*,” he snickers, grinning at the little pout on her lips. “It just would have saved us some trouble. And a few days.” He lets out a sigh, contented, his heart full, and Rayla knows because she feels it too.

There’s comfort in this. She’s safe in his arms, and he’s safe in hers, and they both know it. There are no more secrets. No more hesitations. No more spaces separating their hands, their bodies, their lips. They’d started off as enemies with feet between them and a war between their people, but somewhere along the line, those feet had shrunk to inches and then shrunk to nothing at all.

Perhaps she should have let it shrink earlier, thinks Rayla. Perhaps that space was never meant to be there at all.

WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES

by Dee Nessling

They were to push through the night to get to Rayla’s village.

At least, that was the *original* plan. Rayla was understandably eager to get home—It was something Callum could sympathise with having begun to miss the comforts of his own. A nice warm bed and real food... it almost sounded too good to be true after weeks of rough travelling, sleeping on the ground, and little to eat.

“We can make it there before sunrise,” she had reasoned. “And we’ll be able to get some sleep before talking to the council. Oh, I can’t *wait* to see everyone again...”

She had been smiling for so long, Callum had almost forgotten what she looked like without one. It was... nice, he thought. To see her so at ease, so excited—it was a welcome change from how tense she had been in Katolis.

A change... yes... there had been a change since they had gotten to Xadia, hadn’t there? In more ways than one. A strange stirring in his heart, a closeness they hadn’t quite shared before... or perhaps they *had* but had been too nervous or distracted to acknowledge or think about. With the moderate peace they had found since leaving the border behind them, it was only now starting to rise more and more to the surface of his thoughts.

‘He’s my friend. My best friend.’



He knew it to be true of her too. Such a dear person she had become to him...

There was no denying it. He knew this feeling. He knew what was happening. He was absolutely smitten with the girl, and though he couldn't quite pinpoint when exactly these feelings had taken root, it was a truth that held strong in his heart.

Her smile... his heart yearned to see her smile as much as possible. He wanted to share in her joy, in her laughter, like they had in the adoraburr field only hours ago. He wanted to share everything with her, to have her in his life permanently. Maybe, just maybe, after Zym was brought home they might have a chance to spend their days together in peace...

She caught him staring before he even realised that he was, and he watched her lips twitch and her cheeks go a little pinker as she glanced away.

"What?"

"W-What, what?"

"What are you looking at me like that for?" she asked.

Callum's eyes snapped back to the path, his cheeks burning. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realise I was... I was just thinking. That's all."

She didn't press him any more than that, instead just giving him a gentle shoulder bump. Maybe one day he would tell her how he felt. He thought, or rather *hoped* that she might feel the same way. At least, he got that feeling from her sometimes. From the softness in her eyes or the warm, gentle smiles she had sent his way recently. But was something like that even *possible*? An elf and a human—?

Together?

He was distracted from his thoughts when a cold droplet of water bounced suddenly off the end of his nose. Black clouds had crept up on them overhead, hidden by the growing blackness of the sky. He could feel it too, the Sky Wind Arcanum rushing through his very soul, thrumming with energy. Zym grew agitated in his arms; the baby dragon could sense it too it seemed, and he grew excited, wriggling and chirping desperate to frolic in the coming showers. It was a nice feeling, but also a problem—

“Rayla, I think it’s about to rain.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, a smirk on her features now. “Wow, what gave you that idea? The drops of water falling from the sky?”

“No, I mean, I think it’s about to rain *really hard*. There’s a storm coming.”

Rayla’s expression faltered before hardening. “Then we should pick up the pace.”

Unfortunately, their original plan was about to fall through.

They were only travelling for a few more minutes when the heavens opened up above and they were caught in a torrential downpour.

Still, Rayla pushed them on, leading the way. Even when the wind caught up, shoving them like an invincible barrier making it nearly impossible to move forward, and the rain pounded them so hard Callum could feel it aching into his bones. It was getting hard to see now, and any excitement Zym had once felt had given way as he curled up as small as he could in Callum’s arms, making himself as small as he could burying his face in the boy’s chest.

“Rayla, I really don’t think this storm is letting up any time soon!” he shouted over the bellowing winds after what felt like an age. “We should take shelter!”

He could no longer see the elf, and anxiety caused his heart to lurch in his chest. Was she too far ahead that she could no longer hear him? He froze up in panic.

“Rayla? *Rayla?*!”

“I’m here! I’m here.” She appeared through the misty torrents of his vision, reaching out and grabbing his hand. Relief washed over him as he clung to her with numb fingers. “Come on... I know where we can wait this out.”

*

Callum staggered weakly after her, his legs heavy like lead from the cold, but Rayla guided him as best she could, until finally he felt the painful drumming against his head and shoulders cease. He would have collapsed had it not been for the girl, tugging him back up as though sensing his fatigue.

Callum’s tired eyes tried to take in his surroundings, but it was too dark. Rayla however, he could hear moving around confidently, without any difficulty.

“Rayla...? Rayla where...?” He stumbled reaching out to find her.

“Here... sit down before you hurt yourself.” He felt her hands on his shoulders, and she gently persuaded him down to sit on a rock with a little push. He didn’t need much convincing, his legs were still trembling and he welcomed the moment of rest. Zym seemed unwilling to move, shivering slightly too as he nuzzled into Callum’s jacket, and Callum pet down the dragon’s soaking mane as comfortingly as he could.

Still he heard Rayla shifting around, the familiar ‘*thwip*’ of her blades, and her sawing and hacking away at something.

“Hey... what are you doing?”

There was silence for a moment, and he could feel her staring at him through the dark as though he had just asked the world's dumbest question. "I'm making a fire. What does it look like?"

"Look like...? Rayla, I can't see a *thing*, I don't know!"

Another, shorter silence. Then, "You can't see? At all?"

"No... Well, I can just barely see my hand in front of my face," he explained. "Are you telling me you can actually see what you're doing?"

"Of course I can," she said. "I'm a Moonshadow elf. We're accustomed to seeing in the dark of night. Wow, I didn't realise just how *bad* human night vision was. Don't worry, I'll sort that out in a moment."

As Rayla set about preparing, Callum squeezed the baby storm dragon in his arms, tucking his knees up in an attempt to preserve body heat. It was so cold. He was so cold. His fingers and toes were numb, and he was shivering now, something that apparently didn't go unnoticed by Rayla.

He heard her sigh and her footsteps draw closer, and though he could not see her, he could almost feel her presence as she crouched down in front of him. Her hands found his shoulders, and he stiffened as he felt her gently attempt to tug his jacket free of his arms.

"W-What-?"

"You need to take your jacket off, it's making you colder. Trust me."

He hesitated, before relaxing slowly and timidly to let her pull him free of his drenched coat. She discarded it by his side, before he heard her rummaging through his bag, pulling something out.

"Here." Something else was draped around him now, the familiar feeling of his cloak, and she wrapped it around him and the baby dragon with such intimate care he couldn't help but feel his cheeks warm a little. He felt her hands linger for a moment, almost unsure, before they slipped gently down his arms and back into the darkness.

"...Thank you." He listened for a moment as she shuffled away and returned to her task. "Hey, aren't you cold?" The question dropped from his lips without him really thinking, and he heard her pause for a few seconds.

"Yeah, but it's fine. I can wait 'til the fire's going." She was quiet a moment longer before adding softly, "As long as you and Zym are alright, that's what matters."

Callum felt a little tug at his heart. '*You matter*,' he thought. '*I want you to be alright too*.'

She dropped something in front of him, the clunk of wooden sticks and branches against stone and dirt, and then the sound steel on flint. With each tiny glimpse of a spark he could see the flash of her face frowning in concentration.

"C'mon..." He could hear the desperation underlying her voice. She must have been struggling with her own frozen hands to get the wood to light. Zym made no effort to move from the comfort of Callum's arms to help her, and he couldn't help but wonder if the little dragon's zappy sparks were soaked through from the rain too.

Finally there was a tiny ember of hope, and she fanned it gently, willing it to combust.

"Here we go... and... there!"

The fire flickered into life, lighting its surroundings in a humble glow. Finally Callum could see that Rayla had led the princes to a

small, rocky cave, its ceiling low and tangled with vines and tree roots, and the entrance a mess of overgrowth that thankfully blocked out most of the rain. Callum needn't wonder where the dry wood she had acquired came from anymore, he could see the lopped off ends of the chunkier roots above them.

But the boy was distracted from his environment by the warmth of the fire, shuffling as close as he dared, and he shot his companion a deeply grateful look. Rayla was a little too preoccupied with stripping her own vest off and laying it close to the crackling wood to dry. It seemed like a good idea for him to do the same with his own drenched jacket, but he was reluctant to open up the cloak to do so and let out the meagre amount of body heat he and Zym were sharing. Instead he rested his chin on top of the baby dragon's head, drowsiness beginning to take hold.

The sound of a shivered breath jolted him back to his senses. Rayla was kneeling opposite him, knees almost touching the burning logs, and her hands trembling as she held them out over the flames.

"Rayla...?" His voice startled her, eyes snapping up to meet his. "Do uh... do you wanna..." The question trailed off, an embarrassed heat tickling his cold cheeks. She furrowed her brow, a soft but questioning look, and tilted her head in confusion. The request felt too weird in his mouth now, and so instead, he peeled open one bit of the cloak to her, hoping she would understand. A chill came over the boy and the dragon immediately, and Zym whined in protest.

"What? O-Oh—I—" Her hand found her hair, fidgeting with it nervously. "...No," she said finally. "No... it's okay, I don't think it's big enough for the three of us anyway..."

"There's room. As long as you don't mind sitting close together." She stared at him long enough for him to start to regret the offer a little, if only by how thick with tension the air had become, but he steeled himself, giving her a little beckon over. He wouldn't let her freeze.

"You're really sure you don't mind?" She mumbled.

"Just get over here," he chuckled softly, trying to ease the atmosphere. "Before Zym gets too grumpy and decides to make use of those sharp little teeth of his."

Rayla shuffled around the fire, her eyes suddenly looking anywhere but his own and finally she came to a rest beside him. He let her gingerly take the edge of the cloak and wrap it around her shoulders.

Zym though, seemed far from pleased. He continued to fuss from how cold he was, and Callum could almost imagine what the little dragonling was saying.

'You're letting all the heat out!'

"I, uh... I think he wants us to close up the cloak more around him."

He could definitely see her cheeks and ears turning redder at that remark. It was practically an invitation to sit *even closer*, as they would have to in order to do so. He thought she'd brush him off. Surely she would, at such a suggestion.

But no, Rayla just pursed her lips, and shuffled so close he could feel her arm pressed against his own. She wrapped the makeshift blanket over them all, her other arm laying to rest across his. His arms suddenly prickled like there was a spark under his skin. It was a strange sensation and he felt almost exposed without his usual jacket. Vulnerable. Did she feel it too?

Well Zym at least seemed pleased now, blissfully unaware of the tension that now radiated off the pining prince and his elven companion. Never in a million years did Callum *actually* think she would willingly sit this close to him, even if it was just so she didn't freeze to death.

“You uh... you okay...?” Callum asked gently.

“Yeah,” she answered. He couldn’t quite read her tone. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Oh uh, n-no... no reason. Just wanted to make sure.” He felt Zym wriggle in their arms to get comfy, settling with a happy little sigh, his head resting against Rayla’s chest. The elf smiled fondly down at their little charge, her hand coming to rest against his head.

They were silent for a few minutes, the rain drumming loudly against the top of the cave and beating the stone ground outside.

“Doesn’t look like it’s letting up anytime soon, does it?”

“No... I suppose we’ll have to accept that we’re sleeping here tonight.” She gave him a rather apologetic smile. “Guess we’ll have to wait a little longer before we can sleep easy.”

“That’s alright. I don’t mind. I’m getting used to sleeping on the ground.”

She smiled at that, giving him a playful nudge with her elbow.

“Oh, getting real outdoorsy now are you? Not missing your castle comforts, Your Highness?”

He laughed, nudging her back. “It’s weird hearing you say that.”

“What, Your Highness?”

“Yeah, even the castle staff didn’t really call me that. I’ve never been one for fancy titles anyway.”

“If... I’m honest...” She paused, her eyes trailing to the rain outside. “Sometimes I actually forget that you *are* a prince. You’re nothing like what I thought princes would be like. I always imagined them to be... snottier. And full of themselves. But you’ve always been so

normal. I-In the best way of course!” She laughed anxiously, clearly flustered. Then she took a small breath before continuing. “—I guess what I’m trying to say is, you’ve always just been Callum to me. Not some prince who I happened to stumble across and fall into this situation with. Just... Callum. Dorky, sweet Callum.”

He smiled. “I’m glad.”

“You’re glad?”

“Yeah! There’s not many people I know who just treat me like a regular person, much less an *equal*. It’s... nice, and I’m really happy that I can just be me with you.”

She was quiet at that, her eyes on his face, a softness on her features that suited her far more than the grumpy scowls from when they had first met. Perhaps she had never considered it from his point of view before. Perhaps she was seeing him in a new light.

Callum glanced away shyly, the eye contact between them becoming a little too heavy, a little too longing for him to bear, if he kept thinking like that.

“H-Hey... do you wanna play a game?”

“A game?” Her expression changed to one of confusion now, and she raised an eyebrow at him. It was a fair reaction. What game could they possibly play right now?

“The five questions game. You know, from the boat, way back.”

“Oh. That.”

“It’ll pass the time, y’know? And I still didn’t get to ask my other three questions from last time.”

“Alright then.” She smiled. “Ask away. But afterwards, I get to ask

you five questions. Deal?”

“Seems fair.” He grinned perking up. “So first question—”

“Third.”

“Okay, *third* question,” He paused. He hadn’t given it much thought, he had only suggested the game to try and diffuse the tension stirring between them. But now he was given a rare chance, one to learn anything he wanted about Xadia, or about her. He wanted to make his questions count.

“So you’re an assassin, right?”

“Right. Question four—?”

“No! Rayla!” He burst into laughter, and it seemed contagious because she started to chortle gleefully too, enough for her head to fall forward and bump against his shoulder. “I wasn’t finished!”

“It counts!”

“No it doesn’t, and you know it!”

She raised her head again, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Oh fine, if you’re going to whine about it. Go on, then.”

“Well, was there ever a time you wanted to be something else?”

That seemed to catch her off guard, and she thought carefully about her answer. “For as long as I can remember, I’ve been training to fight. It’s all I’ve ever known. Though I didn’t really decide that I wanted to be an assassin in particular until...” She paused, ears drooping, clearly upset over something. He could make an educated guess: it was her parents. It had to be. She wanted to be an assassin after they ran from their duties, to try and make up for what they did. “I just always knew I wanted to be some kind of fighter.

Something honourable.” She finished.

“Well... is there something else you’d like to be now—?”

“Is that question four?”

“More like question three and a half.”

She smiled again before faltering. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t know, Callum. I mean... I don’t think being an *assassin* really is what I’m meant to be. I know that now. But if I’m not that then... I don’t really know what I want to try next.”

“Well...” His voice came out soft. “We could always do with more crownguards back at the castle,” he remarked playfully. “I’m sure I could put in a good word for you.”

She snickered. “I’ll think about it. Doubt your people would be too pleased though, having an elf around.”

“They’ll get used to it. After we stop the war and bring peace... everyone will come around to the idea. I’m sure.”

She smiled, eyes glistening hopefully. “Yeah... I guess. You really want me around, after this mission?”

“Of course I do. I...” He trailed off, a sudden pain in his heart. After all they had been through, it had never really occurred to him that after the mission there was a chance they would go their separate ways. That... that they might never see each other again after this.

And that was too much to stomach.

“I want us to stay together.”

She looked up in surprise. “W-What?”

"I-I mean—only if you want to! I just, I'm sorry I started thinking about how weird it would be for us to part ways after we get Zym home, and I might not get to see you as much, if at all, like, what if the border stays closed off? And that thought hurts a lot, so—"

"Callum it's okay. Hey, look at me." He met her eyes. Serious, unwavering, calm. "I won't let that happen." He wasn't sure when her hand had found his under the blanket, but he became acutely aware of it when she gave it a squeeze. "I mean, *come on*, Callum, you really think after everything we've been through together...?" She smiled as warm as the fire crackling by their feet.

"You want to stay with me?"

"Is that your fourth question?"

"...Yeah."

"Yes." Her answer was absolute. "I can't imagine going back to a life without you in it, Callum. We'll find a way. Whatever happens." Callum's heart felt alight and full of affection. A little giddy grin tugged at his lips. "Alright, last question," she said, moving on. "Better make it count!"

'Would you ever consider dating me?' His brain asked, but luckily his mouth didn't listen. It almost gave him whiplash, and he felt himself mentally slap that question away, way to the back of his mind. Instead, in his panic, a different question fumbled out of his mouth, the second that had popped into his mind.

"If you could go visit *anywhere*, anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?"

Thankfully, the puzzled look Rayla was giving him in response to his own confusing expressions moments earlier melted away to excitement.

"Oh wow, how do I pick just one?" She started. "I've always wanted to go travelling around Xadia. Let's see..." Callum watched Rayla's nose wrinkle as she thought hard. "Perhaps the Valley of Floreati? It's far in the north-east, this huge valley, and in the springtime it's so rich in colours from all the flowers they call it the Rainbow River. It's one of the most beautiful places in the world apparently. I've always wanted to see it for myself."

"Maybe we can go see it after we get Zym home," Callum suggested.

"I'd like that. Perhaps after things settle down first though, I imagine it won't be as easy as just dropping Zym off and then leaving straight away." She gave the now fast asleep dragon a little scratch under the chin. "I think you'd like it there too. Aside from how pretty it is, there's also these huge stone pillars, and the way they've been carved, when wind blows through the valley it sounds like it's playing a song. The area is rich in the Sky Primal, you'd have a field day."

"Well now we definitely have to go." He grinned.

Her smile was soft, though there was a glint of excitement in her eyes now as she shuffled to face him more. "My turn."

"Ask away."

"If you could connect to another Arcanum, which would it be?"

"Moon." The word left his lips before he even had a chance to think. She blinked at him, her face curious, and even Callum had to admit that he couldn't quite pin why. At least not right away. "I just... I think moon magic is cool," he explained. "And I wish I could understand it in the way Lujanne said, but... uh..."

Rayla scoffed. "I don't blame you for not understanding Lujanne. She was a little... *perplexing*, to put it nicely. I doubt she explained it very well. But maybe you'll get it, one day."

"Maybe," he agreed quietly. "But for now I'm just happy having my sky magic back. I feel like... *myself* again."

Rayla's eyes went soft. "I'm glad... I'm happy you can do primal magic again. Leaves me less room to worry about you getting tempted back into dark magic again."

"Rayla?" She looked up at him. "I promise you I only ever did dark magic to save you. I never want to go back there, *ever* again."

"...I know."

The air was heavier now, the wind picking up outside. It felt like an age before she had the heart to ask her next question, her tone tentatively bright to try and lighten the mood.

"So uh... what was it like, growing up in a castle and all?"

He hadn't noticed the tension in his muscles until they relaxed. "Well at first... pretty terrifying. I was only about three when we moved in, and before that I lived in a little cottage with my mom and Aunt Amaya. It took a few years for me to get my bearings, and it's still easy to find passageways I've never explored. It's all so big and sprawling."

She nodded, her voice quiet. "It seemed to be when I uh, *visited*." The word clearly felt uncomfortable in her mouth.

"It's easy to feel small in it," he muttered. "Especially when I was a kid. I'd always get lost at first, and the guards would have to escort me back to my mom. So it could be kind of... *scary* at times." She offered him a sympathetic look. "But it's nice too," he continued gently. "There's always things to do, and people around, and you don't have to worry about a thing when you're a... a prince. Everything's always provided for you. It's... a pretty easy life to live—besides all the duties you have to uphold, and the expectations people have for you." He paused to reflect. "I'm also so thankful to

have Ezran around. I never have to worry about being lonely."

"It must be nice having a little brother. I always wanted a little sibling growing up, but I ended up an only child." She shrugged.

"Well, Ez has certainly taken a shine to you."

She snorted. "Oh yeah, you better watch out Callum," she teased, poking him in the tummy. "I'm gonna steal him away, and then he'll be *my* little brother!"

"What? No!" He laughed, batting away her hand. The pair bickered light-heartedly until Zym whined wriggling irritably in their arms. It was a clear indication that he wanted them to quit jostling him around. Baby dragons, after all, needed their beauty sleep, too.

Callum sighed, settling to rest his head against the back of the cool cave wall. "Alright, what's next, what else do you want to know?"

She looked uncertain about her next question. "If... you don't mind—that is, if it's not too painful to ask... and you don't have to answer this one if you don't want to," she started, drawing out each word almost as though she was stalling. It was enough to make him nervous. "What... what was your mother like?"

Callum felt a warmth stir in her heart. "She was... amazing." He recalled his mother wistfully. "She had a smile that just, well, you knew things would be okay when you saw it, you know? When we first moved to the castle I was so scared, but every time she smiled at me and told me things would be okay, I believed her. And she was so... *inspiring*. So strong. And her strength, it came from her desire to protect the things and people she loved."

"She sounds wonderful."

You guys would have got on, I think," he considered quietly.

Rayla looked up again, curious. “You think?”

“Yeah... Yeah, I really do.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze now under their makeshift blanket, too shy to meet her eye, but he felt her thumb rub softly back and forth against the backs of his knuckles. His breath hitched a moment, as he felt her rest her cheek against his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry you lost her, Callum,” she whispered.

“I’m... sorry you lost yours too.”

They sat in solemn silence for a little while, just sharing in the comfort of each other’s company. It was at this moment that Callum had a realization. He had had almost a decade to grieve, to come to terms with his loss but Rayla... those wounds were still fresh, and painful, no matter how she tried to hide it. Perhaps it was different for her, they were still alive out there somewhere. And she was mad at them. But was she as angry as she said she was? Truly, deep down?

“Why the interest in my mom?” he prodded delicately.

“Hm... I don’t know,” she admitted. “I never knew her, but from the picture you drew, her smile, her eyes... I just imagine you take after her a lot. That’s all.”

“A lot of people say that.”

She smiled. “How many questions do I have left?”

“Uh, two.”

Her smile went playful. “Who’s your best friend in the whole wide world?”

Callum guffawed, not expecting that. “You’re fishing, aren’t you?”

“What? *No*, whatever gave you that idea?”

He grinned, equally as cheeky back, scratching the little dragon in her arms behind his horns. “Zym, *obviously*.”

She mocked a face of pain, theatrically hurt by the statement. “Oh, Callum! And after I spilled my heart out to Sol Regem, too. You *wound* me!”

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic,” he laughed. “You know it’s you.”

“Do I?” she hummed. “I’m not certain that I do.”

“What?” He raised an eyebrow surprised. “Well what am I supposed to do, prove it somehow? Is this a Moonshadow thing?”

She laughed gently, with a small shake of her head. “No, Callum. It’s not a Moonshadow thing. I just want to hear you say it.” She was smiling more genuinely now, a glimmer of anticipation in her eyes. “Tell me I’m your best friend, and then I’ll know it to be true.”

Callum let out a little huff through his nose, but his heart grew so fond in that moment. His face softened. “Rayla,” he shifted to face her more, heart pounding as he instinctively pulled himself closer, their noses almost touching. “You *are* my best friend. I mean it.”

Her eyes sparkled, wide at first, then they relaxed, half lidded. She closed them, and he felt his heart do a backflip as she leaned forward, bumping her forehead to his. She was chuckling softly, relaxing against him.

“...Wow,” she whispered, her breath tickling his lips.

“Wow...?”

“Yeah I... I don’t know what else to say.”

“Well... You still have one question left. Why don’t we start with that?”

She thought carefully, peeling her head away from his to gaze at the pouring rain outside. Callum lingered for as long as he dared, almost subconsciously chasing after her touch. There was a flash, briefly lighting up their cave, and he watched her ears twitch a mere half second before thunder rumbled through the air and reverberated deeply around them. Rayla turned, a smile on her lips, eyes shining bright.

“So... do you still feel something every time the lightning strikes?” she asked quietly.

Callum felt breathless in that moment, captivated. He was love-struck, and he could feel himself falling more and more with each passing second that he gazed at her.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Yeah, I do.”

You are so...

TOGETHER

Dear Rayla,

We're together now. I love waking up to just go find you training in the morning. Or that I can just kiss you or see you smile. I can listen to you talk about magic and Xadia and the Silvergrove all day. I'll never get tired of it.

It's not easy being with you, some days. But I know it's not easy being with me all the time, either. I just know I'm lucky. And I'm happy. After everything we've been through, somehow, we're happy together. Nothing in Xadia ever has been or ever will be more magical than that.

Or you.

Love,
Callum

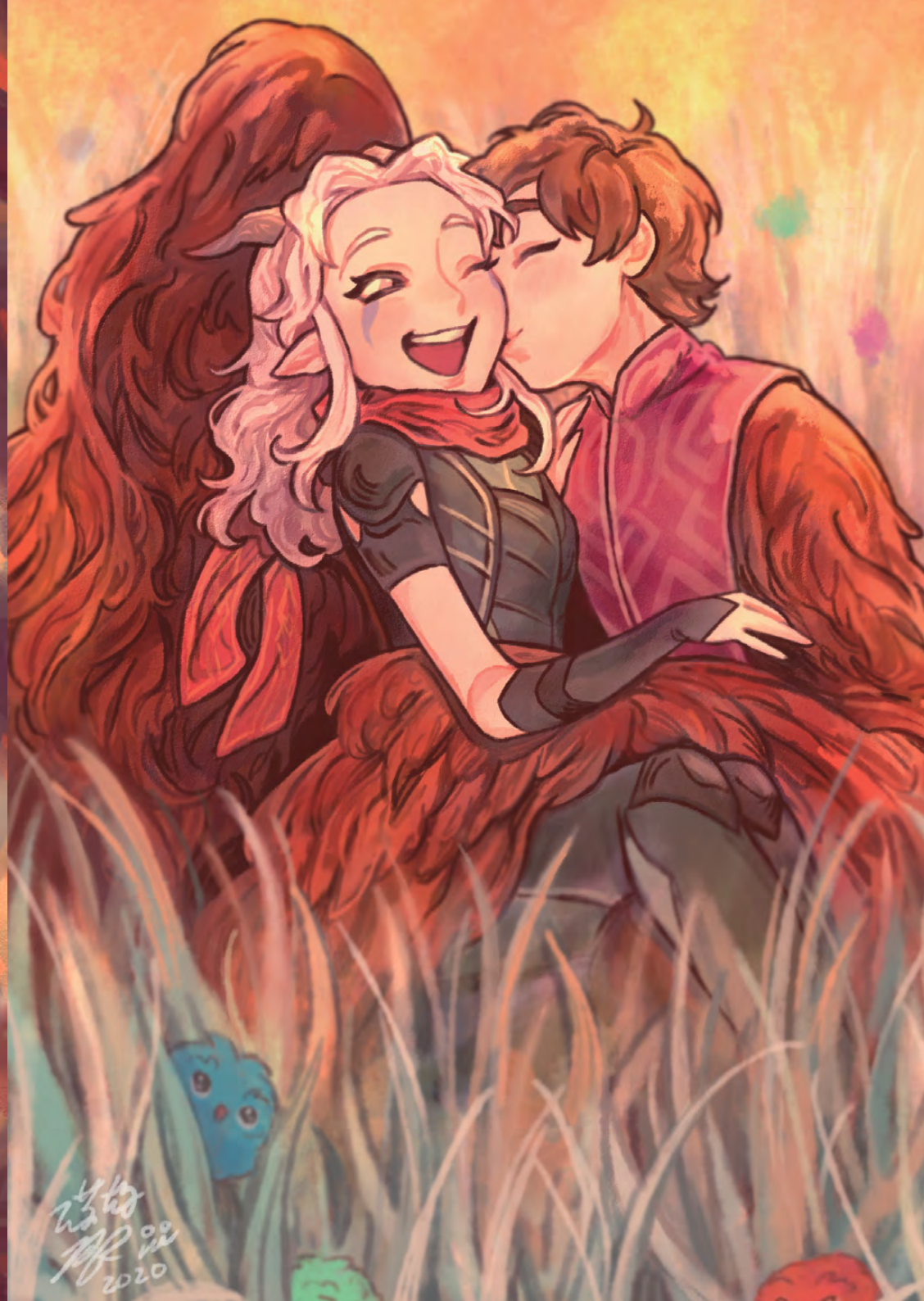




























UNDER THE SAME SKY

by Cyanide

They had been running for so long. *Too* long. Time wasn't managed by the sun, moon, and stars anymore. Rayla tracked it by the newly formed calluses on her feet, the continually lightening scars around her wrists from the bindings, the lengthening of everyone's hair.

She looked over at Callum as he stared once more into the distance. She knew exactly what he was looking at, hours before they would take their last stand to protect Zubeia. It wasn't as though he could actually *see* what was out there. They were too high up, and the clouds looked more like a sea from this height.

But the image was in their heads clear enough.

She watched as his eyes narrowed, still trained on the place where the cold, unmoving body that once was Avizandum's lay.

"I know there's no other choice, but I can't help wonder if there was anything we could have done differently," he whispered, reaching out for her hand.

She interlocked their fingers, gently rubbing her thumb against him. "Come with me." She tugged him all the way down the tall Storm Spire and into the field below. (Pyrrah could come get them later.) She walked in the opposite direction of the stone dragon, frozen in time behind them. She doubted either one of them wanted to be near him.



Finally, when she felt like the air was a little lighter, she sunk to the ground, and Callum followed a few moments later.

He inhaled several times as if to begin a conversation while they stared up at the darkening sky. After his sixth try, she reached down and placed her hand over his once more.

It was trembling.

She wondered if hers was doing the same.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly.

He looked at her and barked a laugh. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s the pollen in the air?”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t help her own chuckle. “Your allergies *have* been acting up since we got into Xadia.”

But his mind was somewhere else again. “Tomorrow changes everything, and I can’t—” He shook his head. “I don’t know what to think right now. Except maybe that I’m going crazy. What if it was all for nothing?”

She knew what he meant. Her mind was spinning with endless possibilities. Ceaseless *what* ifs, some awful and others optimistic. But she pushed it all away. Nothing was certain anymore except that he was next to her, and she...

She loved him.

She got up on an elbow to look down at him. “We’re here together, and we’ll know that we did the right thing. *That* counts for something. We beat the odds! Humans, dragons, elves, and all. We have come so far, and somewhere along the way, it has to be worth something.”

It was as much encouragement for him as it was herself.

He nodded slowly, considering her words. “Hey, Rayla? I’m glad I met you.”

“I’m glad I met you, too,” she said quietly.

“And I’m *also* glad you didn’t kill me. Would’ve made this journey a lot faster though, huh?” His half smile warmed her cheeks.

“I’m glad you decided to trust me. I know it wasn’t easy.”

“I couldn’t have done this without you. You’re my rock. You know that right? You help push me to do better, to *be* better. The world is so much vaster, so much more beautiful than I could have imagined. Thank you for teaching me that.” His voice wavered slightly and her heart went out to him.

“I... I feel the same way. I learned that not all humans are bad, and not all elves are good. What it meant to not give up, to always do what’s right regardless of the cost. *You* taught me that tradition can be the cost of innocent lives. So, thank *you* for that.”

He exhaled amusedly. “Look at us. Having big feelings time!”

She held up a hand. “Don’t push it.” She turned towards the sky, eyes tracing the galaxy above them. “You know, it always amazed me that we shared the same sky. For some reason, I thought it would look different outside of Xadian borders. But everywhere we’ve been, it’s just beautiful.”

“Yeah. *Beautiful*,” Callum whispered, but she could feel his eyes on her. She had a feeling he wasn’t just talking about the stars anymore. “Maybe we even looked up at the same time, and we didn’t even know it.”

She squeezed his palm. “More than once, I’m sure. Do you know any constellations?”

He gripped her wrist, lazily outlining other abstract shapes in the

sky. He tapped his chin and mouthed a few names, as if to give himself a refresher. "Harrow and I used to sometimes talk about the stars. I know a few."

He started naming them slowly, making sure she followed his movements and understood how the lines connected. But then he began to rattle off names faster than she could follow. Regardless, it was nice to hear his tone lighten up if only for this moment.

Tomorrow weighed heavy, but she felt safe here with him.

Indestructible.

There was nothing they couldn't do, so long as they were together.

She would stare fearlessly into the wicked face of evil and denounce it. She would fight until she couldn't and even beyond that. She would not falter, and she would not retreat. She would make any sacrifice necessary for the ones she loved.

Because Callum would be with her.

Even if they weren't side by side or back to back, they were forever united by the unwavering skies above them.

"But *that* one..." The awe in his voice snapped her from her thoughts. He traced out a familiar shape, but it was missing some crucial points to be the one she knew. "That one is my favorite. We call it the Dragonling. It's so hard to see the galaxy from the cities. It's so vast... I forget how many stars there are out there."

"See those three extra points?" She pointed them out with her hand, urging him to do the same. "We call it *Equitem Draconis*. The Dragon Rider." She paused, taking in his profile as his eyes darted across the sky in newfound wonder.

"Why do they call it that?" His wonder at the organic magnificence was impossible to miss.

"The stars tell the story of a violent confrontation long ago between the elves and humans, like the world had never seen and would never see again. It is said the dragons were impartial during the wars, but not for the lack of both sides trying. No one knows why there was fighting, but it's said that all of our rivers were formed from the tears that were shed.

"One day, a Startouch elven princess was rescued by a human infantry soldier. They were stuck in a ravine for days, living off whatever they could scavenge. Slowly, they fell in love, protected by the blanket of night. But their food supply wouldn't last them forever. As the hunger in their stomachs threatened to consume them, a dragon appeared. They pleaded their case, and so moved by their love was the dragon that she agreed to help them escape and hide."

She took a deep breath. The starlight in Callum's eyes made her heartbeat faster.

"If they were found, it was sure they would be put to death. But they were discovered during their flight, moments from safety. Humans and elves alike tried to kill them. Eventually, a group of powerful mages sent a storm to separate the lovers. In the midst of the violent tempest, their only choice was to hide in the heavens, but the elven princess fell from the dragon's back. The human soldier spends the rest of his days in the sky in search of her."

She drew his attention to another cluster of stars.

"And *that* is what we call the *Draconis Flere*. The Weeping Dragon. It's said the Dragon Rider chases after the Weeping Dragon in hopes of one day being reunited." She swallowed thickly. It was a shame she couldn't give Callum a story with a happier, better ending, but she didn't want to lie either.

Rayla scooted into his side, pressing her hand firmly over his chest. It was comforting to feel the steady beat of his heart when she felt

like hers was beginning to waver.

He reached out, as if to capture the Weeping Dragon in his palm. She did the same, trying to imagine the Dragon Rider nestled between her digits. Slowly, they brought their hands together. He was warm against the slightly chilled breeze.

“They’ll be together again someday,” Callum said firmly.

But she had to laugh. “You truly believe that? You think the stars will miraculously realign to spite an urban legend?”

“No, not out of spite. *Love*.” He ran his fingers through her hair slowly. “There’s nothing it can’t do.” He smiled down at her, playfully tugging at her silvery strands. “However, I do wonder... Why would the elves tell you a story about in love with your enemy?” he wondered.

“Well, they don’t ever end up together for starters. Don’t you humans have stories of star-crossed lovers?”

“Of course!” He thought for a moment, eyes closed in concentration. “But they’re star-crossed. You know. *Doomed*.”

“It sounds to me like all these stories were supposed to be more deterrent than romantic,” she said, a little saddened to see how close the *Draconis* constellations were. They’d never meet, and she doubted a cosmic event of disastrous proportions could change that.

Callum gestured to the Dragon Rider. “If that were *me*, I’d never stop trying to find a way to be with you, star-crossed or not. Which we definitely are *not*. And no distance is too far to go. Not when you’re involved.” He sat up and pulled her with him. Painfully gentle hands clasped her face, and she found it impossible to look away. “A galaxy and a half wouldn’t ever be enough to keep us apart.”

She mirrored his position, pressing her forehead against his. His

cheeks were slightly red from the wind, but his eyes slid shut once more. Reveling in the feeling of her fingers. She was careful to not poke him with her horns.

“Callum, please just remember that wherever we are in this world, we’ll both be under the same stars,” she said. It was likely they’d be separated by tomorrow’s battle, given the plan Amaya and Janai had drawn up, with him on the Spire Ledge and her possibly down in the battle itself. “If you ever feel alone, I promise you, at least we are looking at the same sky.”

“The same moon and the same sun,” he added.

She broke into a smile, wrapping her arms around his neck. His immediately wrapped around her waist. “And tomorrow, we’ll be under the same clouds.”

His shoulders moved against her as he snickered. “It’s funny you say that.”

“Hm?”

“Considering my arcanum is sky.”

She pushed him away, joining in on his laughter as she fell back into the ground.

They stayed in comfortable silence, although she was a bit more optimistic than when they had descended from the Spire. She began to hum softly, wondering if the rest of the world was this still. Or perhaps it felt the electricity in the air, the anticipation of the earth for what lay ahead.

Callum stood, offering her a hand. She took it, preparing for the long climb back up if Pyrrah or Ezran hadn’t noticed their absence, but Callum pulled her back to his side. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To bed—”

But he swept her up and began to move. “Keep humming. I know how to dance to that song.”

She pursed her lips, skeptical. “But it’s a traditional elvish song?”

“I still know it. Come on, stop being so stiff. Dance with me.” He shimmied his shoulders to entice her further.

She couldn’t help the amusement that blossomed within her chest. It was growing increasingly difficult for her to say no to him. “Fine. But after this, let’s go back up.”

“Deal,” he said.

Gently, he pressed his lips against hers.

They twirled around the flowers, lightning bugs dancing around them sparingly. It was as if the stars themselves had descended to comfort them.

Maybe... Maybe if the fireflies were stars, it wasn’t a stretch to think the princess and the soldier would find one another.

And if they could find one another at the end of it all, so would she and Callum.

Spinning beneath stardust and infinities, she had never felt so enormously small but important.

They would do what had to be done.

Together.

SECOND SIGHT

by Wordswithdragons (Raayllum)

Somewhere in the time they’re sitting on the ambler’s saddle, arms around each other, Callum reflects that he doesn’t know much about relationships. Once upon a time, he might have. He could vaguely remember the warmth of his birth father’s smile and his mother’s fond recollections of him. He remembers seeing Harrow and his mother, waltzing with soft smiles or passing Ezran over to the other’s arms as easily as a loaf of bread. How Harrow always made an effort with Callum even when he still clung to Sarai’s skirt.

But even that ended at age six, and Callum had only had books to learn from since then. He’d spent his pre-teens imagining himself as becoming some sort of hero, rescuing a Claudia-like figure from a tower. Belatedly, he’d realized she was more akin to the dragon—or the witch—and that his *actual hero* was waiting for him at the foot of the tower with his backpack and an offer to fight by his side.

Say the word and I’ll go back into that tower with you.

Now, Rayla is sitting next to him, the starlight soft and making her eyes shine. Silver tresses frame her face, as beautiful as the rest of her. Callum has never felt so wide eyed before, his mind this *clear*. For the first time in a while, things feel simple. They have Zym back. They haven’t lost the world’s last hope for peace. They aren’t running from soulfangs and the desert heat is much more bearable at night. His feelings *aren’t* unrequited. Rayla likes him as much as

he likes her. He didn't screw up his one and only shot with her.

Her arms feel like an oasis in the middle of the desert, relief still crashing over him in waves as he gets to drink in the image of her, the night sky dark around them and the moon framing her head like a halo.

Her lips curve, and the fact he knows what they feel like pressed against his own now distracts him from noticing her smile, at least at first. "What're you looking at me like that for?" she asks, fond.

"Just thinking," he says. Then, because he tries to be honest: "I really am sorry about last night. I just—I'm not good at romance, I guess."

Rayla softens, a tiny furrow forming in her brow. "Well I also over reacted, trying to save face," she admits. "You were doing fine."

"Still." Callum swallows and it hits him, all the things he doesn't know. Does his outing with Claudia at the Moon Nexus count as a date? Does he want it to? "I've never done this before. This—you're my first kiss."

Her smile grows and he can see a trace of nerves and giddiness in it. "You're mine too," she says. "But that's okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She blushes but doesn't look away. "You're a good kisser."

His insides feel like fireworks. "Oh! Um. Thank you." Rayla's eyes dart away in a sort of eye roll, and then she looks at him with a twist of her mouth. "You're a good kisser too," he adds, because it's *true*, but his brain is still kind of short circuiting. Still, Rayla seems satisfied as she settles against his side again, both of them careful to avoid her horns poking him, but Callum doesn't entirely ease. "But that's kinda what I mean," he continues quietly. "I don't really know

how to do this. And I don't want to say the wrong thing again and—"

"Callum." Rayla raises her head as she cuts him off, her expression sympathetic. "You're not going to say the wrong thing. And I'll try and be more patient." She reaches up and touches his cheek with soft fingertips and after a second, he leans into her touch; it's new but welcome. It feels natural. Her other arm is still braced along his back. "And you're doing just fine," she reiterates. "With your big heartfelt speeches and cute face and initiating smooches."

His lips quirk. "You think I'm cute?"

Rayla groans even as her smile widens. "Very," she confirms. "And if you can defeat giant fish and slugs and save a baby dragon, I'm pretty sure you can figure out how to woo a girl. Especially one who already likes you."

She *likes* him. Callum doesn't think he'll ever get tired of having that fact stated or shown, even if something else snags his attention, his lips curling as he asks, "Woo?"

"Oh shush," Rayla flushes. "You know what I mean. Taking someone someplace nice. Showing off for them."

"Hm." Callum's arm tightens around her waist. She's extra cute when she's flustered. "So, us going to the adoraburr meadow, was that you 'wooing' me?"

Rayla never stops surprising him, so Callum shouldn't be as caught off guard as he is when she flips his flirtation on its head. "That depends," she smirks, toying with his scarf next. "Didn't it work?" She tugs him in for another kiss and Callum melts into it.

Stories have nothing on real life, it turns out. Maybe love isn't a happy ending (or at least not yet, in the middle of a war), per se, but a brighter beginning. A lifelong thing. A promise of things to come.

Real life kisses are definitely better than real ones, Callum thinks, even if he doubts he'll ever get used to kissing Rayla and being kissed by her. It certainly feels like it, his chest full and his fingers laced through hers before she lets him fall asleep on his shoulder, her body a warm weight next to his.

But maybe relationships are just figuring things out along the way, too, at their core. Together.

He could get used to that.

*

They're climbing the mountain, limbs aching, and Callum stares at the back of Ezran's head as a point of focus, the shiny gold badge pinned to his brother's backpack glinting in the sun. The farther they walk up the Spire, the more the sea of clouds rises up on either side of the wide, rocky staircase, and Callum's breath thins. It feels like so long ago he and Rayla flirted before they passed through the archway and he'd been delighted at making her laugh. At knowing that she too, at least, thought they were a thing. (If Callum is being perfectly honest, he'd been *hoping* for boyfriend but hey, he'll take it. Maybe elves use different terms anyway.)

Either way it fills his chest with light, as he grows more light headed, until he sags against the wall with one weakly folded arm. They can't keep going like this. *He* can't keep going like this. It feels all too similar to slogging through the rain after Dark Magic, plus when he'd started drowning in his dream. It's awful. "The air's so thin," he wheezes. "I can barely breathe."

There must be something wrong with the way he pushes himself off the rocky wall, knees bending, because he hears hurried footsteps behind him and then Rayla has her arms wrapped around his chest to keep him upright. For the first time since they really started climbing, he can rest, even if he feels a little guilty that she can

probably barely breathe too, and she still ran to catch him.

"Thanks," he puffs out with a slight smile, but it fades as her arms quiver and their bodies keel over together. She can't hold his dead weight forever. They slump over, too air headed to even feel the ground.

"It's too much," Rayla says, and Callum can't keep his eyes open. Fear tears at his chest but his lungs have no room for it. What if they pass out here? What if they die here? So close to their goal...

With what seems to be her last bit of strength, Rayla curls her hand into his and he gives her hand a weak squeeze. At least they're together as everything goes dark.

Callum doesn't know how much time passes before Ezran is shaking him awake and his hand slips out of hers—before he's drawing out a rune and giving the spell what little breath he has left—before air is rushing into his lungs as he and his brother beam at each other. Ezran holds Bait close but Callum's attention turns sideways to—

He scrambles over to her on his hands and knees, gently tugging her up into a sitting position. "Rayla, wake up," he coaxes. "Come on." She coughs, sputtering, but there's air in her lungs now, isn't there? Callum keeps a hand on her back, his other on her arm. Then she evens out into a normal breath, and Callum closes his eyes, a relieved smile gracing his features. She's awake and breathing, smiling back at him. "We're gonna be okay," he says and closes his eyes, puckering. Rayla leans over and kisses him, a reassuring brush of her mouth and soft, warm lips, and it's as easy and natural as breathing—perhaps easier, considering earlier.

He can feel the gentle press of her smile, so he pulls away and gives Rayla one of his own. She returns it and Callum is thinking he'd like to gaze at her forever if he could when Ezran says, "Hey, that isn't a part of the spell."

Callum's eyes widen at his brother's confused, almost suspicious looking expression. *Ob Gods*, how did they forget about Ezran? He and Rayla glance at each other and then she hides her face behind one hand, which is adorable, if entirely unhelpful at giving an explanation.

But all Callum can do is point and grin. "Uh, yeah! So, uhh... you were gone for a while, and now this is a *thing*, so..." It is kind of exciting to tell someone about him and Rayla for the first time, especially Ezran.

Ezran just looks more confused. "What?" Then his jaw follows Bait's in hitting the floor. "*Wba—?*" *Finally*, the singular word breaks, and Ezran keeps on gaping. "What? When did this happen?" he cries, still thrown.

"Uh..." Callum glances over again. Rayla's peeking through her fingers. "Two days ago?"

Ezran gasps. "But I was only gone for like, a week! I thought you liked Claudia!" His focus switches over to Rayla. "And I thought you were *cool!*"

"Okay, why do *both* of those feel like a shot against me?" Callum frowns, almost pouting and aware, if unwilling to admit, that he may be projecting on Ezran's behalf.

Rayla shakes her head, the embarrassment passing as she removes her hand from her face. "Hey," she says to Ezran, "I can be cool *and* kiss your dorky brother. And Claudia is old news." She looks at Callum. This is the most they've outright talked about it. "Isn't she?"

"Yep," Callum agrees quickly, gulping even if it's 100% true. It has been since they left the Moon Nexus what feels like a whole lifetime ago, but he doesn't want to give Rayla any reason to think

otherwise. "She kinda ripped out my heart and stomped it to death."

"For Dark Magic?" Ezran half teases.

Callum's lips twitch. "Something like that." His hand finds Rayla's almost unthinkingly. "And now I've got something way better."

"Sap," she chides, but she's smiling, her eyes full of just as much tenderness as she gazes at him.

Ezran looks between them again. "So you're really a..." He seems to struggle with the word.

Callum looks at Rayla, waiting, until she sighs, still smiling, and says, "A thing, yes."

"Huh." Any trace of confusion or uncertainty evaporates from Ezran's face, replaced by a brilliant grin. "That's *so cute!* I'm really happy for you guys."

"Thanks," says Callum, softening. "We're uh..." His smile turns a tad shy. "We're really happy too."

When they start the trek up the mountain again, Callum takes Rayla's hand. She gives him a small grin and grasps his fingers back while they walk, and Ezran makes a bit of a face—this will take some getting used to for all of them but it's not bad at all—before he leads the way like before.

(Eventually, Ez will turn around and make Rayla promise not to hurt his brother, and all those sorts of things, and she'll grin and agree and tug Callum closer, an embarrassed flush still high in both of their cheeks.

Perhaps love isn't the absence of embarrassment, exactly, but the act of loving shamelessly in spite of it all.)

*

Rayla weeps at the Spire. The antechamber is cold as they sit up the first night. Callum goes from holding her hand to holding her period, as Rayla cries into his shoulder, feeling fragile and small. It's unfamiliar and that makes it all the more unwelcome, as she sits there in the space of all her parents' sins.

If her parents hadn't fled the Dragonguard, the egg never would have been stolen. Maybe the assassination mission wouldn't have happened and Runaan would still be alive. Ethari wouldn't be heartbroken and alone in the Silvergrove. Her village wouldn't have ghosted her. Her parents wouldn't have been ghosted.

(Rayla went three months, falling apart and wondering why no one else was, before she spotted Runaan and Ethari with their arms around each other, heads bowed. "It doesn't make *sense*," Runaan said through gritted teeth, voice hoarse. The first and last time she'd ever see Runaan look remotely teary.

She thinks of Runaan's broken promise to his husband through no fault of his own—through her parents' for requiring the mission to happen in the first place, through her screwing it up.)

Ethari's pendant hangs heavy around her neck but Callum doesn't draw away even as they sit up all night and her eyes turn dry and dull. Without the mission, she never would've met Callum. Without a mission, Runaan and Ethari never would've confessed before the former went off to carry out his assassin duties.

Callum.

Gods, Rayla loves him, the feeling flowing strong in her chest as she lifts her head from his shoulder and looks at him. She'd been so terrified at the thought of losing him from Dark Magic, at losing

him at all, at watching him drown.

A fear of drowning, more than water itself, has been at the top of her list of fears for a long time now. If there's one thing Moonshadow elves know, it's that fear is the result of potential for things to go wrong, and if you master yourself, you can control your surroundings. You can remove the potential. But she'd sat there, helpless and clutching him to her chest while his lungs seemed on the verge of giving out. It hadn't been *fair*.

Every time she's felt like she's about to drown, he's been there. A steady hand on her shoulder, on the shore, before he pushed her shame and the boat away. Pulling her up to the surface from the bottom of her self-hatred spiral. Here, now, in the place where it hurts the most.

She thinks of when she was four years old and how Runaan would sink into Ethari's arms on his return home. How Callum sank into hers after the storm. She thinks of this as she and Callum weather another storm with tears and hurled words, ended by a sketchbook and clear understanding. When worry creases his face as he watches Ezran fly off against the night sky and they know whatever follows at dawn will be the end.

She takes his hand and grips hard. Love is shelter. A safe harbour.

She kisses him before they separate for the battle to come and hopes she will find him on the other side of it—if he doesn't find her first.

That maybe, the storm will finally be over, and they'll never have to leave each other's arms again.

*

They land on the pinnacle in a flurry of feathers. It's not exactly a smooth landing, but Rayla's heart is still beating so erratically in her chest she doesn't think she'd be able to have anything feel smooth,

period. Callum's breath is warm against her lips and the corner of her mouth as he manoeuvres them over.

Now that he's focusing on something other than her for the first time in more than an hour (he had to sprint up the Spire with her in mind, at least), Rayla takes the chance to watch him instead. His hair is windswept and soft between her fingers. There's a worried glint in his eyes when their feet scuff the stone before they settle firmly on the middle of the pinnacle's circular surface. Rayla unloops her arms from around his neck and touches down first, helped by her slight inch on him, before Callum lands next to her.

He topples over, unused to wings and much less standing with them, and Rayla grabs one to help steady him. The feathers are as soft as his hair, her hands curling into the crook of his wing, and Callum looks at her for just a few seconds before they both burst into giggles. Her brow brushes his, his wings wrapping around her, and Rayla fits against him. They're alive. They're okay. Two things she thought would never be true again only a few minutes ago, her heart still beating hard in her chest. She'd been so scared of her own death, and then terrified of his. She'd been so ready to die.

Tears prick at her eyes and she curls closer. She didn't want to die. Feels the same sort of somber edge overtake him as Callum tucks her into his side and their eyes meet. Her laugh turns teary. She's so ready to *live*.

"I love you," she murmurs. It doesn't feel like enough. What she feels for him—what he just did for her—feels too *big* for love, but it's the best descriptor she has for it.

"I love you, too," Callum whispers back, then a few more times, his voice raw, and Rayla's voice is a similar hoarse echo. They almost *lost* each other. His wings melt away and then he's holding her in his arms, gripping tight, and Rayla grips him back. They sway, two kids suspended on the top of the world and holding onto only each other,

hearts finally calming.

They're *okay*, thanks to a miracle. Thanks to—

But how *did* you—?

'Cause I love you, Rayla. I really do.

Thanks to love. Rayla settles, drawing back but keeping her hands on his shoulders. She can't stop smiling (or crying), her hands reaching up to gently touch his jaw, the ends of his hair. Callum exhales as he leans forward and rests his forehead against hers.

Love is miraculous.

Love is a safe place to land.

*

On the way back to Katolis, they get a few questions. Mostly from Corvus and Opeli, who understandably have them. They're not rude, either. Corvus is quiet, but good natured, and even helps to fill in some of the blanks, like how and why Pyrrah got shot down. Opeli is traditional but not scandalized at the fact her new crown prince and king are best friends with an elf.

Friendship, it seems, is easily understandable to them. How could you not travel across a continent on a deadly mission and not become friends, at the very least? The two adults had found themselves in a similar situation, suddenly sworn to Ezran and having their very different paths colliding.

Corvus, at least, seems more interested in learning how Callum and Rayla fell in love, as does Opeli, although she's less overt, her eyes merely shifting in interest rather than shining.

“Was it love at first sight?” Corvus eventually asks while they walk near the front of the armies. They’re escorting Janai’s forces home to Lux Aurea, too.

Callum and Rayla share a look and then burst out laughing. “Gods no,” Rayla says, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, and seeing her that happy always makes his spirits soar.

“But I did like her ears right away,” Callum says, half-teasing, snorting when Rayla swats him in the chest.

“I thought he was an idiot,” she says. “And very brave.”

“And I thought she was dangerous,” Callum adds. “And very beautiful.”

“I guess neither of us was *wrong*,” Rayla remarks almost slyly. He rolls his eyes. “Although, yeah...” she softens. “We were wrong about each other in a lot of ways.”

“They say hindsight is twenty-twenty,” Corvus says and Callum grins at him.

“I don’t mean to damper the mood,” says Opeli, glancing around to make sure Soren is out of earshot. “But what about Claudia? I was under the impression that you were fond of her, Prince Callum.”

“*Were*,” he emphasizes. “She’s not who I thought she was.”

Rayla takes his hand and squeezes it. “A lot of unexpected things happen,” she says to Corvus and Opeli, and then to him. “I certainly never expected *you*.”

“I didn’t expect you either,” he smiles, his shoulders easing. He laces their fingers together. “I don’t really know when we fell in love,” he explains with a shrug. “Or when we started to. It just happened.” It

felt, in retrospect, like it’d *always* been happening. Every moment he and Rayla spent together had been leading up to this, amazing and unlike anything he’d ever known. “Definitely not at first sight, though,” Callum agrees, “but...”

He thinks of the first morning they’d spent together, outside the castle and under the tree when she’d approached him first, and her gentle warmth when she’d teased and taught him about magic. When she’d listen to his heartfelt speech and held him more gently still, agreeing to his idea against her better judgment and hardened demeanour, a soft smile on her face. The warmth that had flooded his cheeks, a hand at the back of his neck as he stared after her, wondering how it was possible that someone he barely knew was treating him better than almost anyone ever had. No put downs like Soren. No stagnation like Claudia.

Just Rayla, recognizing herself in him, and treating it kindly. Their first morning together, but not their last.

Callum smiles wide, his eyes brimming with love as he looks at her now. Her expression mirrors his and it makes his heart feel full. “Maybe at the second.”

FUTURE

*You mean too
much to me.*



Dear Callum,

Well, Master Romance. Or Prince Romance. Do you see us together in the future, too, then?

We can have a nice wedding in the Silvergrove or however humans get married back at your big castle. We can go to that Banther Lodge with any little ones we might have and you can love me forever. And I could love you forever. If that's what you might want.

Some day.

Love,
Rayla







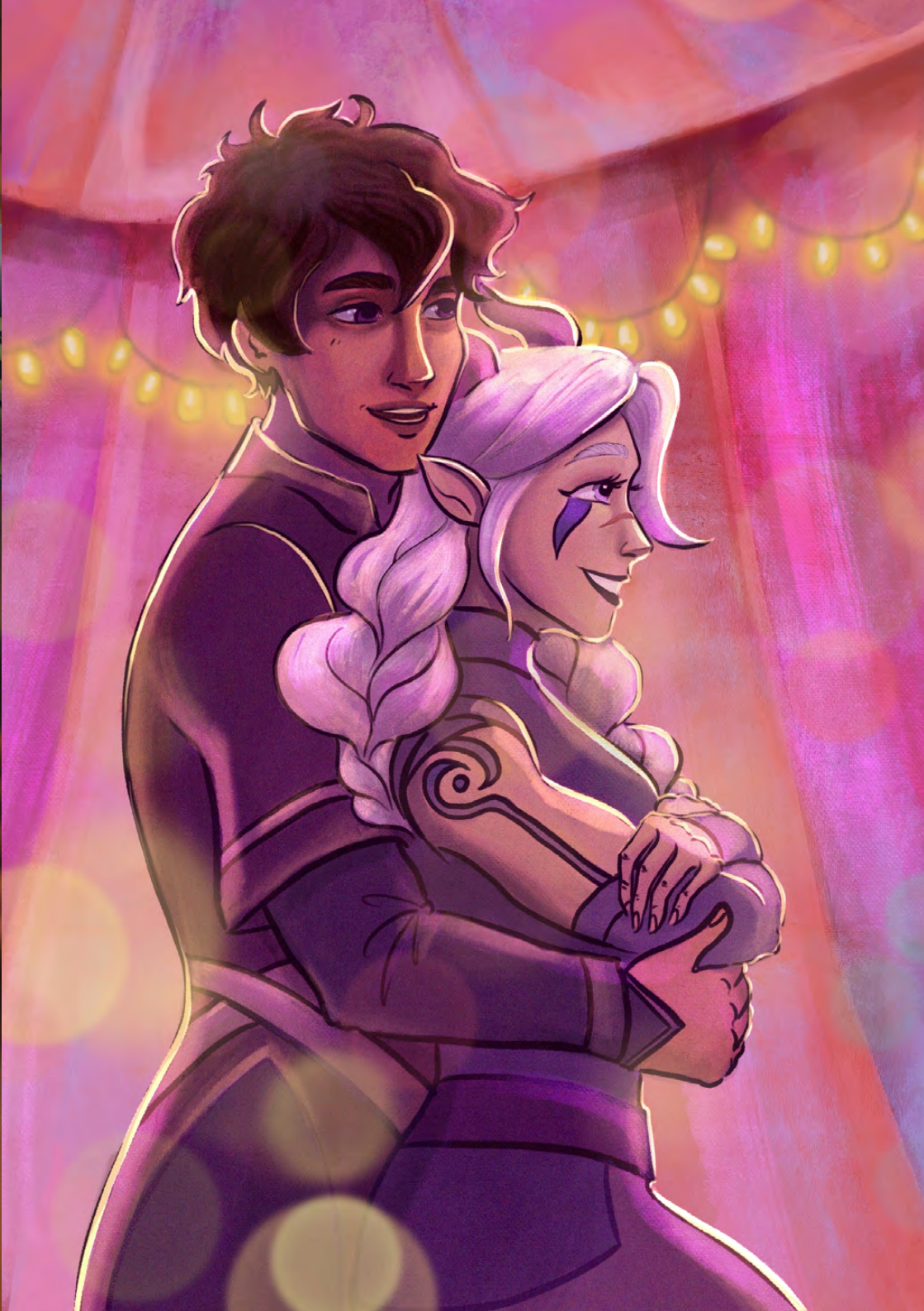














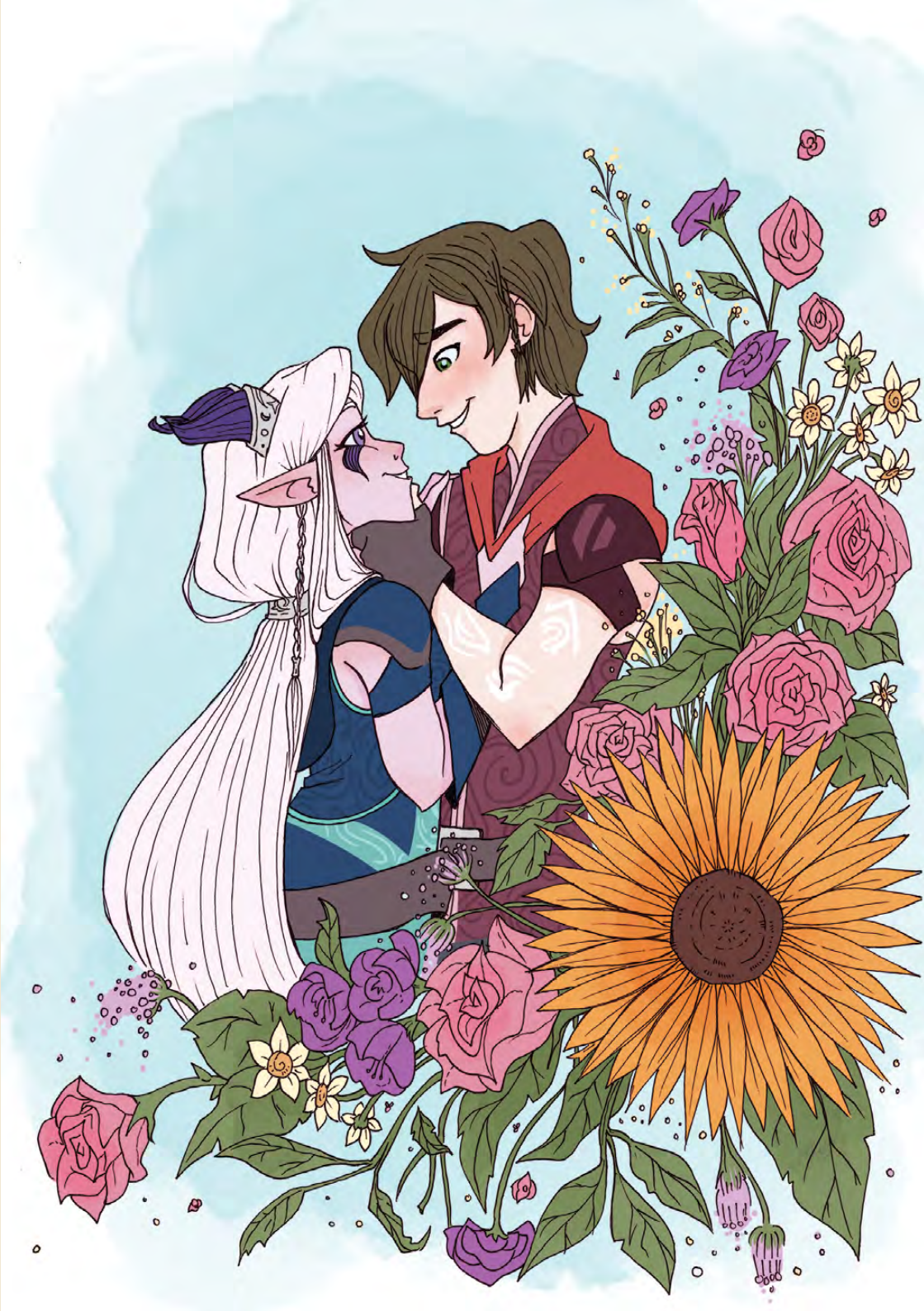
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*"Destiny is a book you
write yourself"*



A BOOK YOU WRITE YOURSELF

by Spiritypowers (Thosefiveadoraburrs)

It was in the process of clearing out Callum's old room in Katolis in favour of a more permanent residence at the Spire that Rayla found the old sketch/spellbook. She'd seen it before; Callum had never been particularly private about his thoughts or feelings, openly sharing what served as a journal more than anything with her and Ezran. It was strange to think that it had been fully filled less than a year ago. Between gathering a new Dragonguard and his training under Ibis, not to mention the general rebuilding everyone had had to do under this new, tentative peace, time had both gone by far too quickly and so slowly all at once.

Callum poked his head in from behind his bedroom door, the old room almost bare save for his bed and a few books on his desk that he didn't mind leaving behind. "Do we have everything?"

Rayla flipped to the next page. "Yeah," she said absentmindedly. Callum sat down next to her on the edge of the mattress, smiling softly when he saw what was in her hands.

"The new one is almost a quarter of the way full," he said, patting the new sketchbook at his side. "Crazy to think this one has been filled up for a while."

Rayla stopped at a sketch he'd drawn of him, Ezran, and the king, sledding during winter at the Banther lodge. Then she turned back to the letter pasted on the inside of the cover.

"We should take it," she said softly, closing it with a little more reverence before placing it in Callum's hands.

"Yeah," he said, his voice just as soft. "Where would we keep it?"

"Maybe in a drawer in our room. Just to have around." She smiled. "It's important. Got a lot of good memories in there."

Callum tilted his head at her, his lips twitching upward. "Since when are you sentimental?"

"It's just nice to look back at where we started, sometimes." She got up, smoothing her tunic down. "Now come on, we can look at the rest later."

"Hey, you got to look at more of it than I did—"

"You wrote most of it," she called back as she left the room. Callum let out a soft snort, taking a moment to flip through the pages. He'd had it for almost ten years, but so much had happened last year that over half of it was just about their initial journey to take Zym back to his mother.

It was kind of a neat first-hand account of the end of the war, he thought idly.

He closed it, slipping it into his knapsack before getting up from the edge of his old bed. He lingered at the doorway, turning to look back at his childhood room, now clean and almost bare.

They really were all growing up.

*

Naturally, it always took longer to unpack than it did to pack everything up. Callum could vaguely remember a memory in which his mother had made a joke about them finally being moved into the castle a year after they'd actually moved in, when she'd set an old vase that had been forgotten in a box somewhere in the lower storage rooms on the mantelpiece in the family parlour. He hadn't understood it at the time, having just turned four, but the joke finally landed when he found himself unpacking the last box a year after they'd officially moved into the Spire. The old sketchbook had been crammed into a corner of the box, the very last thing to be unpacked, and for a moment, he just stared at the leatherbound cover, dustmarks trailing beneath his fingers. The spine was well worn, and some of the pages were loose, either sketches or written scraps of paper shoved in by him, Ez, Rayla, Soren, and... Claudia.

"I think Ibis is looking for you," came Rayla's voice, beating her to their bedroom door when she paused under the archway, smiling a little. "Is that what I think it is?" she asked, her eyes on the book in his hands.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I... We're officially moved in!" he said, smiling weakly.

Rayla raised an eyebrow at him, taking the old sketchbook from his hands. "We've been moved in for over a year, Callum."

"Yeah, but we *finally* unpacked the last box. That means we're officially moved in."

She let out a soft snort, opening up the first page. "We're almost halfway through your current sketchbook, yeah?" she asked as she flipped through.

"Yeah," Callum said, the newer sketchbook a comfortable weight at his side. Having finally fallen into a somewhat normal routine, with the war over for two years now, and students for both of them

to train—aspiring mages on his side and aspiring Dragonguard members on Rayla's—Callum found himself sketching out simpler things again, like Zym and Queen Zubeia resting in their chambers, or Ibis teaching one of the students. More often than not, he found himself sketching Rayla, either in the middle of training or just resting, on her own or with an ever-growing Zym resting his head in her lap. It wasn't exactly a secret that she was his favourite subject, after all.

Rayla stopped at one of the pages, placing a hand over her smile. "I still can't believe you really made little profile pages of us," she said, sitting down on their bed.

Callum sat down next to her, grinning when he saw she was on her "bio" page, with a full-body picture of her that he'd drawn and coloured in with some watercolour paints they'd picked up on the journey back. His scrawlings still looked fresh, little comments about her "cool blue markings" and other features he'd noticed at the time written around her picture. His eyes scanned to the next page, with a list of facts he'd written about her. His smile grew when he saw her list of likes: "sarcasm, making fun of how humans talk, adoraburrs, moonberry surprise," and he'd listed off later on during that night they'd spent years ago curled up together on that ambler, "me".

"I can't believe it took me that long to figure out just how much I liked you," he murmured, drawing closer as he wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Yeah, you wrote a *lot* about me," she said with a smug grin, "and drew me *all the time*." She laughed when he pouted at her, pressing a quick kiss to the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah, I did," he said, smiling slightly. "But you're the one who actually knew how they felt first, right?"

"Maybe a few days before you did? We had a few more thought consuming things going on. Also, *we were kids*."

"Because two years makes us so much more mature now?"

"Yes?" But as soon as Rayla replied, they both burst into laughter. "Gods, I can't believe it's been over two years already." She looked back at the book in her hand, a loose page starting to fall out. A few of the bound pages were starting to loosen at the seam. "We should probably keep these someplace more secure," she said. "See if we can restore the spine, maybe?"

"I dunno," he said. "A lot of them are a bunch of sketches that, if I had a bigger book, would be their own page. Plus..." His smile faltered. "There are some memories that I don't exactly want to look at every day."

Rayla flipped over a few pages, and Callum only briefly saw Claudia's page before she shut it. "Then... we can pick out the pages you do want to look at more often and paste them all into a bigger book. I think a lot of it might be jumbled up, anyway, so you could rearrange the pages as you like. Maybe even into something chronological," she added, a tad teasing.

He thought for a moment, looking at her. "So... like scrapbooking?"

The corner of Rayla's mouth lifted. "Yes, like scrapbooking."

"Would we have the time?"

"Well, between your students, your work with Ibis, and my shifts and new students..." Rayla's nose wrinkled a little. "If we get the spare time and energy?"

Callum softened as he looked at her, her eyes still trained on the book. "You'd really wanna sort through all those old pages with me?"

"Well, why not? I think I've said before that it's an interesting first-hand account of the end of the war. And... it's also kind of our story."

Warmth bloomed in his chest. "Aw, Rayla..."

"I've promised myself to the absolute sappiest man alive," she said resolutely. "I'm allowed to be sentimental every so often."

"You are so *cute*," he beamed, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Rayla wrinkled her nose at him.

"Shut up," she said, her voice fond as she quickly pecked his lips. She set the old sketchbook aside before getting up, taking Callum's hands as she pulled him up with him. "But for now, we promised Zym we'd take supper with him, so, do you want to get back to this later?"

Callum nodded, a soft smile still stuck to his face. "Definitely."

Of course, life often happened too quickly to plan out, so when they received word about a bag of coins and a dangerous, growing movement, the scrapbook was, for a moment, forgotten.

*

It was still crazy to him how much could change in another three years.

Between finally defeating Aaravos, securing peace across both sides of the continent, freeing Rayla's parents from Viren's coins, and moving to the Silvergrove to grow their little family, it was a wonder that the old sketchbook was found in their pile of unpacked boxes late one night during their second summer in the Silvergrove. Their second sketchbook had filled up similarly just under a year into their stay here. It was a wonder that all their boxes could still fit

into the far corner of their little cottage at all.

Callum slowly opened the old sketchbook, its leather cover worn and soft to the touch. The corners of his mouth twitched when he saw the first page, “sketch” crossed out and “spell” written above to read *Callum’s Spellbook*. His handwriting had hardly changed, still round and neat and—

He unfolded Harrow’s letter from where it was tucked, just behind the first page.

Dear Callum,

We don’t know each other well yet, but...

Callum wiped at his eyes to keep his vision from blurring as he read through the letter. He’d almost forgotten what Harrow’s handwriting had looked like, blocky and rushed but still somehow readable, in dark ink that had smudged slightly over the years.

I have a feeling you have great things inside you, and I can’t wait to see you discover them.

Callum’s throat tightened, and he let out a shaky breath, wiping away a tear before it could splash onto the page. If only his dad could have seen how much he would change in less than a few years. How much the world would change, just sixteen years after receiving that first letter and sketchbook.

He turned the pages slowly, his heart full as he glanced over each one. Full-body sketches of Ezran, Rayla, and Zym, and others, all of them so much younger; entries he’d written about finding the egg; a jelly tart recipe that Barius and Ezran had long since memorized; pages and pages dedicated to Rayla, whether it was about her courage in spite of her fear of water, or her “human Rayla” expressions that had long been unused. Even pages that had once

been hard to look at, like his sketch and commentary about Runaan before he’d really known him, or the pieces about Claudia, before she’d reformed and they’d all made up, filled him with a strange sort of peace, warming in his chest and spreading to his fingertips and toes.

He glanced at the living room shelf, a couple of empty scrapbooks resting on the top; they’d been some options for a gift he, Rayla, Runaan, and Ethari had put together as a welcome home gift for Tiadrin and Lain back when they’d first come home. Callum was grateful that they’d held onto them after all this time as he pulled out some craft paste from a nearby drawer and began to carefully tear out and rearrange some pages, setting the project on the floor as he sat down.

He wasn’t sure how late it was when he heard his wife’s soft footsteps behind him. She slowly crouched beside him, silently watching him for a moment as he pasted together various sketches of them as kids on their initial journey. “I almost forgot we were going to do that,” she said quietly. Callum smiled, pausing as he turned to look at her.

“You’re not tired?” His eyes followed Rayla’s hand as she rested it over the modest bump of her stomach.

“The wee one isn’t letting me get any rest,” she said, settling down next to him. She picked up one of the sketches he’d ripped out, setting it on the page he was working on. “I think that one should go with these,” she said.

“I was gonna put it with the page about your blades.”

She looked at him with a slight smirk. “You’re dedicating an entire page to just my blades?”

“A whole spread, actually. I spent so many pages writing about them, okay?”

Rayla laughed. "Fine. But I still think this picture works best on this page. It's nice to have a page with a bunch of sketches of all three of us together."

Callum considered it, adjusting the sketch a little. "You know what? You're right," he said, and he flipped it over and began applying paste to it with a small brush. Rayla picked up the old scrapbook's leather cover, more like a cloth now that it was empty.

"We could glue this to the spine, or something," she said, picking up her own paste brush. "So everything's still in one place?"

Callum smiled. "Yeah. I think it'd go with the cover picture I'm pasting on when we're done with the inside, anyway."

"Cover picture?" Rayla asked, and her expression softened when he pointed to a coloured sketch of them with Ezran, Bait, and baby Zym. "That's perfect," she said. "But why are you working on it now?"

He paused, setting his paste brush down. "I just thought... Someday, our baby's gonna ask us how we met. And I wanna be able to show them, while we tell them. I want them to see how messy it was. How unexpected, and... how beautiful."

Rayla's eyes were shining when he looked up from the page to her. "Callum, that's wonderful."

"I want it to be a birthday present. I know they're not gonna ask about it for a while, but just so we can say that we had a gift for them before they were born."

"Well," Rayla said, wiping at the corner of one of her eyes. "We have about four more months to work on this. Wanna try to get some rest after we finish up this page?"

His heart swelled as he looked at her and thought about all the sketches of her that he'd pasted into the scrapbook. Thought about how she'd been the last thing he'd ever expected, but was now in nearly every single page, every subsequent chapter of his life. How his story wouldn't be complete now without her in it.

"Okay," he said, but he didn't look away from her when she went back to pasting. "Hey, Rayla?"

"Hm?"

"You're my happily ever after."

He watched her eyes glisten again as she looked back up at him, beaming. "And you're mine."



A DELICATE DISPOSITION:

A BONUS FOR FANS OF THE DELICATE SERIES

by Jellyjay

It's an accident. Sort of. Rayla will swear on her life that she's never once missed her tea, but she's been throwing up for weeks now, and she hasn't had a bleed in longer still. There's no denying it. The proof is there. But in spite of the nausea, and the moodiness, and every other symptom that screams the truth, there's a part of her that doesn't want to believe it—not because she's not ready (she's not, but what can she do?), and not because she doesn't want it (she does, even if she does find it hard to admit)—but because she doesn't like the idea of being vulnerable, and there's nothing more *vulnerable* than being—she takes a breath—*pregnant*.

So she pretends she's not. Vulnerable, she means. It's hard to pretend she's not pregnant when her entire body knows it, but she can still pretend she's not *vulnerable* and that those other symptoms—the ones that haven't yet started—*won't* happen to her.

Maybe she's right. Maybe they won't.

She's not.

They do.

*

The first time it happens, Rayla's not *ultra* prepared for it. She'd known in her head, of course, that things like this were likely to

happen, but for the most part, she'd sort of brushed it off as unlikely to happen *to her*. She's hardly the emotional type, after all, and yeah, things have made her cry in the past, but things were also considerably *more* serious then.

They've enjoyed four years of relative peace now, and she and Callum have been married a week. There've been no snide remarks, no poorly disguised digs at elves from humans or vice versa, not even a hint of disrespect from the lesser families or the castle guards. There's not even a meeting they have to rush away for, for once, and it's been smoother sailing than she ever thought possible—

Except for the nausea, of course, but the healer in Lanthia had said that that's pretty par for the course.

It's still supposed to be a secret. They still haven't told anyone yet, and the ones that do know only know because they'd figured it out. Honestly, it's still pretty ridiculous sounding to Rayla, and *she's* the one who's been throwing up four times a day for three weeks. She's spent a pretty solid portion of their married life so far curled up in bed or on the bathroom floor, mug of ginger tea between her palms to still the spinning room and to wash the taste of bile out of her throat, avoiding anyone and everyone in case they figure it out too.

But it all comes to a head one morning when Callum comes back from breakfast with a tray of plain toast and fruit juice and a gentle sort of understanding in his eyes.

"Still not keeping anything down, huh?" he says.

Rayla groans. She's got her head buried in her arms by the toilet again and her stomach turns at the thought of food, but Moon and Stars, she has to eat *something*. It can't be good for her, and it certainly can't be good for—she steels herself for the thought—*the baby*.

She hears Callum sigh, and his fingers are gentle when he pulls her hair back from her face. He presses a kiss into the top of her head and settles behind her, one hand idle against her still-flat belly. "It'll pass," he promises quietly.

"What if it doesn't?"

"It will," he says, tucking her hair behind the points of her ears. "Besides, you're the strongest, most amazing person I know. It's gonna take more than nausea to put *you* down."

"Easy for you to say." Rayla sucks in a breath. She pulls back from the seat, her eyes shut tight, her hands pressed against her forehead as if that might keep the room steady, but she's up for all of ten seconds before the bile rises in her throat once more. She gags into the bowl, her shoulders shaking with the exertion, and she half expects Callum to leave, irked by the sound or the smell or *something*—

But he doesn't.

It can't be nice, having to listen to his wife empty the contents of her already empty stomach, and he can't enjoy holding her hair back to keep vomit out of the silver, or having to put up with the smell of sickness every morning—but he's patient and undeterred, like usual. He rubs his free hand across her back; helps her off the bathroom floor when she's finally, *finally* done; tucks her back into bed and brews another mug of tea for her, unprompted—

And when he presses it into her hands, Rayla starts to cry.

"Hey!" Callum shifts in the bed, panic in his eyes and in his voice, and she knows he means well, and that he just wants to make it better, but knowing that just makes it *worse*.

Rayla whimpers. "How are you *so nice*?"

Callum frowns at her, confused. "What?"

She bats at him, frustrated and grateful and *sad* without really knowing *why*. It's the hormones, she reasons—there's a bunch of them stewing within her, and it's normal to be moody and upset by the most irrational things, but that's the problem. She's *not* reasonable or rational right now in the least, and it's bad enough that Callum's been going out of his way to take care of her, and now there's *this* too. She curls into herself. Leans forward in the bed until her forehead meets his shoulders and her tears leave stains in the sleeve of his shirt. "I just like you a *lot*," she snuffles. "I don't—*bic*—you have no idea how much I *appreciate* you and—"

Callum lets out a disbelieving sort of chuckle. There's no malice in it. No mockery. It just sounds flattered by her ridiculousness. "Let me get this straight," he says, trying to make sense of it. "You're upset... because you appreciate me?"

She shushes him and swats feebly at his arm like it'll help. "Just—*bic*—let me dumb, okay?"

He says nothing for a while. Rayla gets the feeling he's trying not to laugh again for her sake. If he did, it'd be fair, and she wouldn't even be mad—she'd laugh at herself too, if she could—but he's far too *nice* for that, as always. He pries the tea out of her hands instead, more patient and careful and understanding than he should have any right to be, and sets it on the nightstand. "You're not dumb," he says gently. "You just need a hug."

She pouts against his arm, but it would be a lie to deny it. "A hug would be nice."

He does chuckle then. Gathers her into his arms and presses a kiss to her forehead, hiding that amused little smile against her skin. "It'll pass," he says again. "The weird emotional stuff too. You'll feel like yourself again in no time."

Rayla snuffles once more. She believes him.

*

The second time it happens, Rayla's a little more prepared for it. They're in Adamina for a negotiation about human mining operations near or on this side of the Breach—just for minerals, and for stones imbued with Primal energy so it's more readily available and there's no reason for humans to turn back to Dark Magic, nothing untoward—but the elves here (everywhere) are stubborn, even if the ones in *this* city are marginally more amenable to change in comparison.

She's pouting at her reflection this morning. Yesterday it'd become pretty clear that fitting into her old gear isn't really an option any more, and the dress suits her, but she's grumpy about it. She doesn't like dresses at the best of times, but there's something about having to wear a *maternity* dress that makes her feel more vulnerable than she already is. It's hard to explain. It's fine for Callum to see her weaknesses, she thinks. It's *not* fine for everyone else to see them too.

Callum frowns at her on his way past the bathroom. "What's wrong?"

Rayla feels it before it happens this time. The upset building in her throat. The irrational sadness in her chest. The fluid in her eyes. "I'm—" She pauses. Her voice sounds strangled in her own ears. "I'm—"

Callum's frown only deepens. "...Starting to show?" he asks uncertainly.

She nods, her lips tilting downwards in the mirror, her hands drifting to the material of her dress to pull it tight over the swell. It's not even that big a bump yet. She's only seventeen weeks along, and she's only going to get bigger from this point on. It's not like she's ever had a problem with her body image. She's never really *cared* to begin with, and it's certainly not like she's suddenly *unattractive*

because of the extra weight. There's just... insecurity now, and she looks to Callum with a pout.

"I've never been so big before," she murmurs.

He raises an eyebrow at her. "Well, yeah," he says reasonably. "You've never been *pregnant* before."

"But—" She presses her lips shut. It's hormones, she reminds herself. She's not *really* upset. She's just moody and pregnancy is not so easy to reason with. "I—"

Callum purses his own lips, the understanding clear in his eyes. "I still think you're beautiful," he offers, abandoning his own tasks to loop his hands around her waist. He rubs the bump affectionately and smiles at her reflection in the mirror. "If anything, I think you look even prettier. You've got your glow."

Her lip trembles. Her throat hurts. Her eyes fill with tears but she blinks and ducks her head to hide them before they fall. If Callum notices (he does, and she knows it), he doesn't say anything. He only smiles, leaving a kiss in her hair and that familiar warmth in her chest.

She tries not to let it bother her too much after that.

*

The aches and pains start at nineteen weeks. They're on their way back to Katolis, but they've got time to stop in and say hello to Rayla's uncles, so that's where they're headed when Rayla starts wincing every time she climbs on and off from her filly's back. Vorobey's not a particularly rough horse, but she's not so gentle either, and it certainly isn't helping the ligaments in Rayla's abdomen or the bones in her back.

She tries not to fuss about it. She's had worse, and she's not about

to let a little ache stop her or slow her down, but it does *hurt*, and of course Callum notices because he notices *everything*, no matter how subtle she thinks she's being.

They could stop for the night in Lanthia. It's becoming a pretty frequent stop for them—they like Callum there, and it's a nice city, all things considered. Theoretically, though, if they kept riding, they'd get home by dawn tomorrow, but Callum's frowning at the way she grimaces with Vorobey's movements and she has a feeling he won't take no for an answer.

"You need to take it easy," he says, disapprovingly.

Rayla purses her lips at him. "We're only riding," she says, pointed and stubborn. "It's not like I'm doing any work other than that."

"Yeah, but you're in *pain*," he argues. "Don't pretend you're not," he adds sharply. "I can see you wincing when you think I'm not looking. Your uncles won't mind if we don't get there 'til tomorrow evening."

It's true, but still. Rayla pouts, pretending her hips and her back aren't killing her (they are), even as she groans under her breath when she climbs off Vorobey. Inwardly, she's glad. Like the million other things she won't admit, the ache is growing harder and harder to bear, and the idea of sleeping it off is considerably more appealing than riding through the night, even if it means another stop in Lanthia.

They settle in their room, and Rayla stifles a moan when she takes a seat on the bed. The mattress dips under her weight, and while it's not her own, or even the one in Katolis, it's definitely more comfortable than Vorobey's saddle, and she's secretly very grateful Callum insisted. She goes to sleep that night contented, her face buried in Callum's back, her arm draped loosely over his waist, and all is well until—

She wakes.

She's not sure why, at first. It's still dark outside, and it feels like there are still hours before dawn. She bristles, still half asleep, but then she tries to turn over and her hips *groan* in protest. It's not a dull ache anymore, it's sharp and it radiates up her back and down to her knees. Her joints feel like they're on *fire* and it catches her so off-guard that Rayla lets out a cry. She claps a hand over her mouth to mute it, but it's too late—Callum jolts awake beside her, his eyes clear and full of concern even in the poor light.

"Hey," he whispers. "Hey, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

Rayla sucks in a breath that doesn't quite make it all the way in, and she shudders as the pain settles and fades. "I'm—I'm fine," she manages. Her voice trembles, and it doesn't even hurt so much anymore, but *Moon and Stars*, is she *crying*? She swallows. "I just—my—my hips really hurt. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Are you seriously apologising right now?" Callum frowns at her through the dark. He scribbles a rune in the air—the glow lights his face and the worried frown creasing his brow—and he whispers into it and brings a little ball of light to life in his hands.

Rayla squints. Rubs her hands over her face to hide the tears and to shield her eyes from the light. "I'm fine," she says again, sniffing a little. "I'm okay now."

"Are you?"

"Yeah." Rayla takes one more breath. A slower one this time, willing the last of the ache out of her bones so she might be able to go back to sleep. When she lays back down on her left, her bones creak in the effort, and she clenches her jaw shut to keep the sound in.

Callum studies her, unimpressed. Then he climbs out of bed. "Put this between your knees," he says gently, snatching a cushion off the chaise in the corner. "It'll keep your hips aligned and hopefully ease the pain. It was in the notes the healer gave me ages ago," he adds,

catching her frown as he seats himself on her side of the bed. "Do you want me to stay up 'til you fall asleep?"

He's so sweet it almost sets her off again. Rayla shakes her head. "It's fine," she murmurs, easing the cushion between her legs. The relief is almost instant, and she sighs as the ache eases at last. "Thanks."

"Don't even worry about it," whispers Callum, tucking her hair behind her ear. "You okay?"

Rayla swallows. "I will be."

*

There's an attack on the castle when Rayla's about twenty-one weeks along.

They'd come back in a hurry. A clinic's burned down, and there are tensions rising between elves and humans in Katolis that certainly weren't there when they left. They'd discussed it with Ezran as soon as they'd arrived but it doesn't make sense. Things were fine. Things were good. And now—

Rayla lets out a shudder. The assassins that had broken in were there for *her*, and they'd come so *close*. The memory of her own blood between her thighs is fresh, and her belly still twinges as the baby moves within it, but *gods*, if she'd been any less lucky—if Callum hadn't woken when he did—

She doesn't like thinking about it.

There's a shop in the city called *The Wishbone*. It's run by a couple of friends of theirs, and Soren and Claudia help run it often enough that it's felt safer than the castle these past few days. Rowena, her midwife, has been by almost daily. "Bathing helps," she tells Rayla. "It takes a little of the weight off your back and the warm water will help with any pain."

She's right. It does. It's one of the few things Rayla's allowed to get out of bed for, and while she'd argue, normally, the fear—of making things worse, of *losing* the baby—is too real.

She's in the tub again when Callum visits later that week.

He's been avoiding it—visiting the shop too often might give away her hiding place, and the last thing they need is for anyone to know she's there and vulnerable. It's been awful for her, but it's no better for him. She's never seen shadows so prominent under his eyes, and his face is hard when he lets himself into the bathroom that morning.

It falters only a little when he catches sight of her. Something like a smile tilts his lips, but it's grim and sad.

"How're you feeling?"

Rayla shrugs. Her throat is raw, and while the swell in her belly is growing, it's not so big yet that she can't draw her knees to her. She sets a hand on it beneath the water, her breath caught in her throat until she feels it twitch under her fingers, but she sighs in the end. "Could be better," she murmurs, resting her chin in the valley between her knees. "How are things on your end?"

Callum breathes out through his nose, exhausted. "The same," he says quietly, crossing the tiny bathroom to sit against the edge of the tub. "I brought you your things. Eleni said to just leave them in Lessa's room. Your butterfly blades are right at the bottom, so you don't have to worry about her getting into them." He presses his lips shut for a moment. The sentence sounds clipped, like he wants to say something else—a joke, maybe?—but he only shakes his head and brushes a lock of her hair out of her face.

Rayla hums and leans into his touch. How she'd missed it. The tenderness of his fingers. The care of his hands. It's pathetic, she thinks, but she can't fault herself for it. Not now. Not while things

have been so dire.

"I miss you," mutters Callum, his words thick with emotion. "I don't think we've been apart for this long in..."

"Ever," finishes Rayla. Her own voice trembles, but she offers him the closest thing to a smile she can muster. "I wish—" She takes a breath. She wishes a lot of things right now, and there are too many of them to say out loud. She sniffles and lifts a hand to catch his. "I wish things were different," she mumbles, pressing his fingers to her lips. "I wish we could just *be*, y'know?"

"Yeah," whispers Callum. "I know." He takes his own breath—one long shuddering one that fills the rest of his body with resolve—and bends to press a kiss into her hair. "I wish that too."

*

They move her to the Banther Lodge as soon as Rowena clears her for travel.

Rayla's not happy about it, but there's not much of a choice. It's this, or stay in the capitol and risk another attack, and she's—

She's more vulnerable than she's ever been in her life, and as much as she hates it—as *weak* as it makes her feel—she's not stubborn enough to risk the life of her unborn child on something as stupid as her own pride.

It still sucks, though.

Callum doesn't come with her because Ez needs him. There's too much tension in the city for him to handle on his own, and, in any case, there's an assassin's conspirator to find, and he can't do that from the Lodge. It makes for quiet, lonely days, even with Rowena, and Soren, and Claudia for company, and Rayla whiles away the hours sitting by the front steps and waiting for news.

Weeks pass.

Then a month.

Then another.

There is none. Only Callum's *I love you's* and *I miss you's* that appear in the little hand held magic mirror that they've been using for communication since she left.

Moon and Stars, how she misses him. He should be here, or at least, she should be there, and he should get to put his hands on her belly and laugh at the way his child twitches and rolls and kicks within her. He should be able to talk to it the way she does, and marvel at how quickly it's grown.

"You miss him too, huh?" she says quietly to her bump one day. She turns her mirror over in her hands, waiting for his handwriting to light it up in her hands. "It won't be for too much longer, little one. Dad's just... got some stuff to take care of. He wants us to be safe."

She draws a breath. She's cried a lot this pregnancy. It's completely normal, Rowena tells her, and it's beyond her control. She shouldn't be so hard on herself, and sometimes it helps to cry.

It doesn't now.

*

She hardly does anything most days while they're out here—the others won't let her—but Rayla finds herself exhausted *all the time*.

"That's normal too," Rowena promises while she's doing one of her check ups. "Growing a baby is hard work, and you've been through more than most. You should take the opportunity to nap while you can, Your Highness. I don't know that you'll have that luxury once the baby comes."

It's supposed to be a half joke, Rayla thinks? Rowena's smile is kind and understanding, but there's a spark of amusement in it too, perhaps because Rayla's so ostensibly and comically frustrated by the way her body seems to want nothing but to eat and sleep.

She'll be coming up on thirty weeks now. The baby squirms and wriggles all day every day, seemingly ignorant of the fact that it's running out of room. Its feet get caught in her ribs, and it nudges into her bladder, and sometimes, it moves so much that it's difficult to sleep anyway, and Rayla spends what's supposed to be her afternoon nap watching it wriggle, half-exasperated, half-endearred by the way her whole belly shifts with its movements.

Other women—not that Rayla personally knows many who've been through this to begin with—had made this sound magical. A wondrous, miraculous time in any woman's life full of love for a person yet to be. Rayla had had her doubts, but this just about seals the deal:

Pregnancy *sucks* and no part of actually being pregnant feels magical at *all*.

Maybe a year from now, when this is all done and over with and her child's a crying mess, she might look back and miss the days she'd just watch her belly move, but right now, at this moment, while her hips ache and her breath is short and what she thinks is an elbow is pressing painfully outwards in her womb, life could not be any harder.

She wishes Callum were here. The others are probably sick of listening to her grumble to herself, but Callum had been nothing but supportive and she's certain that, if she asked him, he'd rub the tension out of her back and her shoulders without even pausing to think about it. He'd hold her close and smooth her hair and read her to sleep if she needed it. His very presence would be a comfort in and of itself.

But the fact is he's *not* here, and it's just one more thing on top of a very long list of things that suck really, *really* bad.

She spills the milk one morning. She's been a lot clumsier recently too, and it's not just because she's so much bigger than she used to be. The jug tips, and milk runs over the counter and splashes at her feet. Rayla stares at the puddle for three, four, five seconds, before her frustration gets the better of her at long, *long* last, and she starts to cry.

Claudia doesn't even ask. "Go sit down," she says gently, ushering her out of the kitchen. "I'll take care of this. Do you want a heat pack for you back?"

"Yes," blubbers Rayla, aware of how ridiculous—how pathetic—she sounds. "Just—don't even—"

"I wasn't going to," chuckles Claudia. "Go on. Leave this to me."

Sometimes, Rayla remembers that there's history between them. Not good history. History that she's not particularly proud of, and, she imagines, history that *Claudia's* not particularly proud of. But things have changed a lot since then, and she's reminded, not for the first time, of how grateful she is for Claudia's presence at the lodge.

"Sorry I'm a pain," she mutters, when Claudia joins her on the front steps with a heat pack in one hand and a plate of tarts in the other.

"You're not a pain," says Claudia. "You're just pregnant. You shouldn't apologise for that."

In spite of herself, Rayla laughs. Pregnancy still sucks, she thinks, but it's not so bad with good company.

*

Her little girl is born after midnight. At least, Rayla *thinks* it's after

midnight. It's hard to be sure. The contractions had started late in the evening, and then it was a kind of a rush to get her out of harm's way as General Balan's forces descended on the mountain.

There was pain, and there was blood, and a battle, further down from the heart of the Moon Nexus, and oh, how terrifying it had all been—

But she doesn't think about any of that.

Callum is here now. They're safe now. Everything is *fine* now.

And their baby—Sarai, they'd named her—is the most beautiful thing she's ever seen.

"She's so tiny," whispers Callum—and, indeed, she is. His hands are big compared to Rayla's, but they're the perfect size to cradle his baby girl, and in spite of everything that's happened, and how *hard* this pregnancy has been, Rayla's heart is full.

She wonders if she might cry again, but there are no tears left. She's grateful to be alive, and happy to meet her daughter, and so in love with Callum and the way he coos at their child as he holds her in his arms for the first time—

And then to her great surprise, *he* starts to cry.

Rayla's lips pull upwards, and she's not sure if she's smiling because she's happy or because she thinks it's funny or because she thinks turnabout is fair play. "Are you okay?" she asks him quietly.

He nods pathetically, his shoulders shaking with emotion. "I'm just—I love you both so much and—"

"You don't have to explain," chuckles Rayla, putting her hands over his. "I get it."

He snuffles. “She’s—she’s so beautiful, Rayla, and I know it’s been a long night, but—I it’s been so *long*, and I—I started to wonder if this day would ever come and—gods, I was so scared I was going to lose one or both of you tonight, and I’m just so *happy*—”

“Callum. My love.” Rayla swallows a laugh and brushes his hair out of his eyes. “C’mere,” she whispers, pulling him to her.

He lets her without resistance; rests his forehead against her shoulder and sobs until his tears leave dark stains in his scarf-turned-swaddle. His shoulders shake, but his hands are firm and steady all the while, tucked securely around Sarai while she sleeps.

Rayla presses a kiss against his temple and hides a smile against his skin. “You’ve been so strong for us,” she murmurs, running her fingers through his hair. “You took such good care of me when I was emotional. I think it’s our turn to *let* you cry now.”

He chokes out a laugh. And, in turn, he presses a kiss to Sarai’s temple, mindful of the way she fidgets in her sleep. “Everything’s gonna be okay now,” he whispers. “Mum and Dad are both here. You’re gonna be just fine.”

“We all will be,” adds Rayla, her face shining with joy and hope and *love*. “That’s a promise.”

It’s one they keep.

I LOVE YOU ALL

by Decoratedexpression



Under their experienced Captain’s eyes, the seven active members of the Dragon Guard had set out to perform a week-long survival exercise. Even in times of peace, there were lots of reasons to run maneuvers and training up new replacements for retiring guards.

While she was waiting for them to find their way back to her campground, the Officer had decided to do some exercising on her own, running and jumping between the intertwining, giant trees of Xadia’s Moonshadow territory.

It was home, and their deployment here was no accident.

As evening approached, Captain Rayla made her way back to where her tent was set up, her bones and muscles aching after the day’s effort. She had just ascended a small incline when she noticed something off. The smell of wood smoke tickled her nostrils. Someone had lit a fire and was having a quiet conversation at her campground. It couldn’t be

any of her subordinates; they wouldn't have managed to make it back this quickly. The experienced Dragon Guard went into a low crouch and snuck forward, finding a patch of tall ferns to hide in.

An adoraburr chirped nearby.

"See, they stack. Put that red one on top," said a deep voice, belonging to a human man in his late forties. His green eyes were framed by wrinkles that let one guess that his current smile was almost ever-present.

"Ah, they're pretty adorable on their own, dad," a higher, creakier voice replied. The teenage boy then giggled. "Heh. Guess that explains the name."

Rayla shot up out of the bushes. The adoraburrs in the boy's hands squealed in panic and raced into the high grass as she flung herself at the two intruders, tackling the older one to the ground. While the teen yelped in surprise, it seemed as though his father had expected her. His arms closed around her back and his lips parted for the kiss that she was offering.

"Mom!?" shouted the boy. Then he cringed. "Seriously, eww!"

Rayla snorted and got up, pulling her groaning husband up with her. "Greetin's, you two! Oh, stop retchin' and get over here, Eron!"

Reluctantly, Eron let himself be pulled into a tight hug by his mother.

"What are you doin' here, Callum? Did somethin' happen? How'd you know I was here?", Rayla asked.

"It's nice to see you, too." Callum smiled and bent forward to kiss her despite their son's disgusted expression. "Zym told Ez that you were here and at the Grove, Tarika pointed us in the right direction. And no, nothing happened. I just wanted to come see you."

"So you've seen Rike? At least she's still talkin' to *you*," sighed Rayla and let go of Eron. "Ee, will you ever stop growin'?"

"I'm not growing. Rike still calls me dwarf! You two are starting to shrink!" Eron replied. At fourteen, his simple blue coat reminded Rayla of what his father had worn at the same age. She couldn't help but wonder if Callum had chosen those clothes for him precisely because of the association. Painted across the boy's nose were purple markings that looked like they could've been inspired by his great uncle Runaan.

"No, you're *growing* because you eat enough for *six*, Prince Eron," Callum said sternly and lightly boxed his son's shoulder. "Thank your mom's good blood for making you grow *up* rather than *sideways* like me!"

"You've got nothin' to worry about," Rayla smiled and gave her husband a charged wink.

"Eugh!" Eron retched. "Can you guys *please* not!?"

"Come on, kid," Callum smirked. "Your mom and I deserve to make out a bit, you're not the only one who gets to smooch their *significant other*."

Rayla's mouth fell open. Her excited smile hit her son like a warhammer. "Daaad! Nooo!!" he groaned and covered his face, but his reddening ears were betraying him.

"You have a *special somebody*? Since when? Who are they? How did you meet? How old are they? What do their parents do?" Rayla demanded.

"His name is Matthis," mumbled Eron. "And he's someone from school. We've been going out for... a while... um, he helped me with some... uh..."

“Bullies,” Callum frowned. “They’re still bullying him.”

Rayla nodded grimly. This had been a thing since their kids had been little. In Katolis, it was impossible to hide who and what they were, the stubby horns and slightly pokey ears gave them away immediately. Sometimes Callum and his wife wondered whether the only reason nothing serious had happened to them was because they were nobles. King Ezran and his Consort were very protective of their niece and nephew. To make matters worse, theirs were still the only mixed children the Prince and Princess knew. It was sad to know that even after two decades of peace, relationships between elves and humans were still rare.

“Uh, yeah, but it’s getting better! I’ve been fighting back!” Eron said and stood a little taller.

“Good,” Rayla smiled and lightly shoved at him. “Rollin’ over for them isnae gonna help anythin’.”

Callum gave her a small frown and a pleading look. He didn’t like the idea of her encouraging him to beat others up, but it was hard to argue with results. Rayla returned the glance with a shrug.

“How are things here? Zym said you had picked this spot for ‘personal reasons’. I’m guessing that reason *is* Rike?” Callum asked to give Eron a break.

“Uh!” the boy went and turned away to take his chance. “I’ll go explore for a bit!”

“Don’t go too far,” Rayla said before turning back to face her husband. Her sour expression told him that things were still difficult between her and their daughter, “Thought I’d take the chance to drop in on her, but she’s holin’ up with the other Mage Adepts.”

“Ehh, she’s studying hard and doesn’t want to be distracted...?” Callum suggested carefully.

His wife merely grumbled. It was almost a bit offensive to her that her own daughter showed little interest in knowing how to handle a sword and how to survive the wild. Tarika would rather spend her time pouring over dusty old books. She was even more obsessed with magic than Callum had ever been. Recently, their troubles had gotten worse when her daughter had announced that she was going to get married. Rayla had come to see her—but Tarika had cancelled the affair without offering any details.

“Did you at least get to see her for her twentieth?” the Prince asked sadly. “I couldn’t make it, but she didn’t sound too upset.”

“I tried. Didnae want to see me after our last ‘*conversation*,’ if ye wanna call it that.”

Callum took her hands in his. They were callused and the skin felt a little thinner than he remembered. Her violet eyes tracked up to find his green irises and he couldn’t ignore the fact that she was studying his crow’s feet for a moment before sighing deeply.

“Whatever’s goin’ on...” Rayla sighed. “I don’t want her to go through it alone.”

“Do you know why she doesn’t want to talk?” Callum asked.

“Apparently I make thin’s difficult! Had to prod and poke to get anythin’ out of her!” Rayla groaned, “I never had my mum to talk to like she could! If only she would!”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you should pressure her into telling you things she doesn’t want to. Just because *you* regret that Tiadrin wasn’t there when we got hitched doesn’t mean she wants or needs the same thing. You’ve got a bad habit of interrogating the kids, Rayla. Did you

notice how embarrassed Eron was when you—”

“I gotta ask him when he’s *around!*” Rayla said tiredly. “I don’t see him every day, Callum! Not like you.”

Her husband let go of her hands and frowned. “You *could*.”

“I have a duty! A job to do!”

“And that job is important, but why don’t you take more breaks, hm?” the Prince said, then started stuttering a bit. Now that it was time to come clean, he barely managed to tell her the real reason why he had come. “The Dragon Guard... uh... should probably start looking for a new Captain soon, right?”

Rayla crossed her arms. “You want me to *retire*.”

Callum merely nodded, watching her almost pleadingly.

The Dragon Guard studied his face for a moment, then scoffed, a small, sardonic smile creeping into her face. “Am I really that old?”

“Almost fifty. Your letters already read like a medical report.”

“Uh-huh? And what about you, *Master* Callum? Have you taught enough disciples the arts of primal magic to settle down and do nothin’ at all with yer day?”

“There are a few that could probably teach in my place.” Callum smiled. “Look, I feel like we’ve done enough for the world. These past few years... actually, these past two decades, we’ve not seen nearly enough of each other. I was so stoked when you told me about Eron not just ‘cause I wanted another kid, but also because it meant that you’d be home. I thought, you know, for at least for a year?”

Rayla’s expression slackened. “That was when that whole thin’ with the

merc’s at Inverness went down... I couldnae give it that long. Are you still bothered by that?”

“No, it’s fine. Gosh, Rayla, I’m not here to give you grief about something that happened *fourteen* years ago!” Callum looked like he couldn’t believe how much time had passed. “I want to spend the last twenty, thirty years we have together like we spent the *first* twenty. Travelling. Adventuring. Sleeping in the same bed.”

His wife searched his features, then extended a hand to pet his cheek. He leaned into her touch and smiled.

“You havnae repainted yer markin’s for a while... they’re all faded,” the Captain pointed out. More quietly she added, “I’ve been thinkin’ about it... How much I miss you and Ee. But if we leave here, who’s gonna look after Rike? Who’s gonna lead this lot?”

“I’m not sure Tarika wants our help right now. I was hoping to go see her again before we go back to Katolis. Still, I think the best thing we can do is let her come to us, so I asked her to come by if she feels like it.”

“Well, whatever she or we decide, I canny just go away. Gotta wait for my people to come back.”

“Duh,” smiled her husband, then looked around conspiratorially. “Do you think we have enough time to—”

“Callum!” Rayla laughed quietly. “Ee could come back any second now! We can sneak out later!”

She gave him a mischievous if loving smile, pressed a soft kiss to his lips, then pulled him along. The Princess pushed her husband down to sit on one of the logs she had arranged around the fire to hold meetings. Next to him sat a wrapped package that Rayla hadn’t noticed before. “Wait there. I’m gonna fix your markin’s.”

Callum watched as she ducked into her tent. A moment later, she returned with a small dispenser bag filled with the purple paste Moonshadow elves used to decorate their faces. Rayla climbed into his lap and planted her feet into the soft ground behind him, then grabbed his chin and turned his face to suit her needs.

“Hey, gentle!” he protested.

Tsk went the Princess and she started squeezing the paste onto his cheek. Callum had chosen to copy Rayla’s tooth-shaped markings, but she had insisted on making them a little more angular. The markings under one’s eyes were personal, after all.

“So, how is he? That *Matthis* boy?” the elf asked with concentration in her mien.

“He’s a good kid, I think. He’s been respectful of me and Ee whenever we’ve had him over for dinner. Tentative, careful. I guess what I mean to say is... they’re cute together.”

“Cute is good,” smirked Rayla. “We were cute.”

“‘Were?’ We still are,” said Callum. “A cute old couple!”

“Those don’t exist. We’re auld farts, is what we are.”

“Hm,” Callum considered. “Dunno about that. When I look at you, I don’t see an old fart. I just see my Rayla.”

“That’s cause you probably need a pair of pincers,” she snorted, “Yer eyes haven’t been improvin’”

“Blurry or not, you’re still breathtaking.”

“Aww, sappy as the first time you grabbed me outta mid-air,” Rayla

cooed. She carefully kissed his nose so as to not smear the paint, then continued her work. “Other than Matthis... how’s he findin’ public school? I hope we made the right call with them not gettin’ special treatment.”

Callum snickered, almost ruining Rayla’s precision work. “I see other Kingdoms’ Royal brats, how little humility some of them have... there’s not a question in my mind that we did okay in the grand scheme of things. But for him, right now? I’m not sure. He’s not complaining, but you know him. He’s a quiet kid, not like Rike. I know they’re bullying him, but...” the Prince sighed deeply.

“Aye, people always judge by looks, we know that. Come to think of it, kinda weird how Ee takes more after you, wiry as he is. Other cheek.”

Callum turned his head for her. “Huh. I always thought he looked like *you*.”

“Well, yea, he has my nose and all that, but I meant character-wise. He’s a gentle soul.”

“Meaning you think of yourself as *mean*?”

“Assertive, more like.”

The crunch of leaves announced Eron’s return and a moment later, the boy appeared out of the thicket. His face was warped by concern. He was holding a few more adoraburrs. “Hey dad, what’s wrong with these?”

Rayla stopped her work and turned to her son. “Show them here, laddie.”

The two puffs of fur the teen was holding seemed totally different from the usually cheerful and cute animals. Their black button-eyes were lifeless and empty, their fur a solid, steely gray.

“Are they... dead?” asked Eron sadly. “They *feel* warm...”

The Captain rose from her husband’s lap and carefully scooped one of the adoraburrs into her hands. The little guy rolled to stare up at her, so there was no doubt that it was alive. It blinked, but didn’t chirp or emote in any other way.

“Soulfang,” Rayla whispered.

Callum shot up. “This far from the desert? How?”

“Dunno, but it’s not normal. Eron, go hide, we’re—what?”

The boy was giving her an angry frown. “You always tell me that running isn’t a solution, mom!” Eron said firmly, “I’m not hiding!”

“Hidin’ from what?” a fourth voice said in the twilight. Everyone present turned in surprise.

“Rike!” Rayla exclaimed and dropped the Adoraburr and the sack of paint. “Rike, what are you doin’ out here?!”

Her daughter stepped closer, fully into the light of the fire. Her right hand held the leads of a young Moonstrider. There were slender markings on her cheek that were completely unlike Rayla’s or her family’s. While her blue eyes looked very human, her hands sported four fingers each and her ears were almost as pointed as Rayla’s. Her student mages’ robes, coloured lavender, flowed quite elegantly in the warm evening air. “Wow, mum. No hello or anythin’, the first thin’ you do is ask more stupid questions. I’m ‘*out here*’ ‘cause dad asked me to come.”

Her mother’s expression sagged.

“Looks like there might be a Soulfang on the loose.” Callum said and

wrapped his arms around his daughter. “I wasn’t sure if you’d come out. Thank you.”

“Aw, dad, I was missin’ you guys already! Hey, dwarf!” Tarika smiled and swayed from one foot to the other while hugging her brother. “So, a Soulfang, eh? We should go take care of it!”

“‘We?’” Rayla asked. “I think you two need tae go back to the Grove! This is way too danger—”

“Not this again!” Tarika groaned. “I can think for myself!”

“Rayla,” Callum cut his wife’s angry response off before it could begin. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Their children gave each other a meaningful glance. Whenever their parents disagreed, they did so under four eyes. Tarika grabbed Eron’s hand. “Come on, dwarf, I’ll show you how tae—”

“You’re gonna stay right here by the fire, young lady!” warned Rayla. “There’s no tellin’ where that snake is!”

“Mum, I’m not gonna—” started Tarika, but this time, *Callum* cut her off by smoothly grabbing the wrapped package from the log and shoving it into her hands.

“We brought some jelly tarts. Better dig in before Ee can’t resist the temptation anymore”, he smirked.

While Eron protested loudly, his daughter saw right through her father’s tactic, and he knew as much. Callum gave her a pleading look. His patented ‘Dad needs your help’ look.

Tarika sighed and slumped onto one of the logs. “Alright, dwarf. Let’s have some treats.”

As the kids tore into the box, their parents moved a few feet away out of earshot.

“So, what’s your pressin’ complaint, my Prince?” Rayla snarked, her arms crossed. “You didnae have tae ‘rescue’ her from me.”

“Do you think we raised them right?”

The question made her blink in surprise. “Is this your way of tellin’ me how much I’ve missed or...?”

Callum cocked his head. “Come now. You’ve been a good mom whenever you had the chance. Sure, running around to fulfill your oath wasn’t always convenient, but you’ve dropped everything for them when it mattered most. Rike wouldn’t be here if not for your prodding. Eron needed someone to tell him to stand up for himself and to show him how. So again—do you think we raised them right?”

His wife thought for a moment, then waved her hand in the air, flippantly. “Yea, I guess. As well as we could have.”

“Then why don’t you trust them to make good decisions?”

“Uh, well, for one, Rike’s really flippant about tellin’ us she’s gonna marry someone and then doesn’t? And Eron’s still a *child*!”

“Let’s not forget, I was Eron’s age when we brought Zym back home. And Rike hasn’t spoken much about her problem with me, and I don’t press her. She’ll tell us more details when it feels right. I think we should let them in on this little adventure. Didn’t you always say that our job as parents is to protect but also to challenge them?”

“Ee is a lot less mature than you were at fourteen,” Rayla said. “I get that you’re cooped up and chompin’ at the bit to get some real action again, but leave them out of it.”

“Yeah, but unlike me, Eron is a wizard with a sword. They *want* to help. I admit, I’d be happy to do something worthwhile with them, too. It’ll be a good experience. Come on, fawn, let’s do it!”

The elf’s lips went taut. “Don’t you ‘fawn’ me, dafty! It’ll be dangerous. What if they get bit?”

“I’d be worried about that if their mom was anybody but *you*,” smiled Callum.

Rayla searched her husband’s eyes for some hint of doubt, but he didn’t offer it. Tense silence passed over them, which was finally broken by the sounds of sputtering and surprised laughter from their campground.

“Sounds like they’re havin’ a blast,” said the Captain and smiled toward the firelight. “Ach, fine. Let’s just nab that bloody snake!”

Callum quickly kissed his wife, then pulled her along to where their children were munching on pastries. The reason for their amusement was immediately obvious, given that Eron looked like someone had dunked his face in persimmon.

“What *happened*?!” Rayla snorted but started rummaging through her backpack to find a washcloth right away.

“Rike slapped my tart!” Eron laughed. “My nose went right through!”

His mother tutted and started wiping his face.

“Mom, stop! I can do it!” the boy protested and grabbed the cloth out of her hand.

Tarika gave her mother a questioning look. “So? What has the High Council decided?”

“Please don’t compare me to those air-bags,” smiled Rayla. “Let’s go

find that snake before it does more harm. There's nothin' in these woods that would know what tae make of it before it's too late."

Excitement manifested in the apprentice illusionist's face as she rose from the log and dusted off her robes. "Grand! Stay right behind me, Ee, okay?"

"Why do *you* get to boss me around?" grumbled the boy.

"Guys, focus," Callum chided and tested the seat of his sword. "This isn't a game. Could be your first real fight, and I don't want it to be your last."

Eron's complaints stuck in his throat.

"You're going to stick to us," Callum continued, "and you're not going to run off on your own, no matter what. Got it?"

"Sure." Tarika shrugged and rolled up her long sleeves.

"Yes, dad," mumbled Eron and unhooked the clasp on his sheath. It held an elven switchblade which he pulled out and flipped into its various shapes.

When Rayla had added a rope net to her outfit and they had all tested their equipment, the family made off toward where Eron had found the gray adoraburrs. Rayla's head swiveled from left to right, her senses sharp with focus. If there was any danger out here, she wouldn't allow it to hurt her children. It was no surprise that the tracks in the mossy ground immediately caught her eye. Bootprints, too large to be Eron's.

"Look here," she murmured and crouched. Her family crowded around her while she explained, "See how the edges of the print are soft, but you can still make out the shape of the boot? That means these are fresh, maybe half an hour. Too much coincidence fer my taste."

"Looks slender," Tarika said. "And square at the heel. Probably a Skywing design."

"Well what else?" Rayla grumbled, then quickly added, "B-but yes, you're right. Well done."

The bootprints led them to a spot where the earth was torn up and flecks of moss were strewn all over. An empty wicker basket lay in the center of it all.

"Hm," Rayla went, "Snake got away, tried to catch it." She pointed along the trail the Skywing elf had left. "Then hightailed it out of there when they couldn't. Careless, but not stupid. Climbed that tree. Look, the tracks end there and the bark's all scuffed up."

Callum tracked around the tree, then nodded. "Yup, they came back down and... Rayla, I think they're close. Check out these prints."

The Dragon Guard crouched and examined the indents. Clear edges made it obvious that they had been left no more than ten minutes ago.

"Okay everyone, keep yer eyes peeled," Rayla commanded in a low voice. "We're in a situation now. Snakes are one thin', but people haulin' those snakes around? That means trouble."

Eron nodded nervously and grabbed his sword more tightly. Pointedly cool, Tarika let her gaze wander over the underbrush. It was an obvious façade.

Rayla snuck ahead carefully, following the tracks. Eron trailed her closely, then came Tarika. Callum brought up the rear.

Faint voices were in the air, talking. They were coming from a small group of people, resting in the evening dark. Rayla pulled her son to the ground to keep him out of sight and the rest of the family followed suit. A few melodaisies were swaying nearby, playing a wild mix of

lullabies.

“...find it! What do we do now?” a male voice whispered. He was sprawled out on the ground, a massive, muscled chest belying his strength. Pauldrons of rock and a cloak of ferns marked him as an Earthblood.

“She’s one person, and she’s old. Why don’t we just, you know, whack her?” a cute, high voice replied. The face belonging to the person speaking fit well, but the scars criss-crossing over her armored arms and a healed gash across her blue-gray cheek marked her as a seasoned Skywing warrior.

“Because we can’t hide that, Midna! As a husk so far away from the desert, she would’ve just been marked as crazy,” said the last member of the group, an Earthblood woman with flowing green hair. Her hunter’s outfit fit loosely over her, as though she had recently lost a lot of weight.

“We’re kinda famous for fighting her, sure, but...” the woman named Midna said. “As Captain, she’d have loads of enemies who might want to cut her up. Janus, pass the canteen, please.”

Rayla frowned back at her small band. All three of them were staring at her, shocked to hear these plans to kill her so casually discussed.

“I want revenge, not give her another chance to ruin my life!” the hunter spat, “We’re more than a little famous! There’s a small statue of her at Inverness, did you know that?”

“Isca, Isca, you sound jealous,” laughed Janus.

“Sure. Jealous. Of that human’s pet and Dragon’s slave?” the woman spat with disgust, “We’re going to find that Soulfang and try again.”

“That’s going to take forever, it could be anywhere.” Midna started

playing with one of her throwing knives.

“You lost the snake, how about you shut it?” Janus said.

While the two of them launched into a whispered argument, Rayla waved her family closer.

“These people are old enemies of mine,” she whispered. “I don’t wanna risk goin’ after them with you guys around. It was a hard fight, even back then.”

“Then let’s not,” whispered Callum. “We should go back to the Grove and get some help.”

Tarika and Eron had blanched a little and nodded as one.

“Good. Let’s move,” Rayla said and waved them ahead.

Still tucked low to the ground, the family snuck away from their enemies, taking a slightly different route from before to get back to camp faster. Suddenly, Rayla’s foot caught something and the sound of makeshift chimes could be heard, interrupting the quiet argument in the camp behind them.

“Who’s there?” Isca called out.

“Run, I’ll hold them off!” Rayla hissed.

“No, mum!” pled Tarika. “They’re gonna kill you!”

“No they won’t!” The Captain shot up to face her quarry. “Callum, get them out of here!”

Nobody moved.

“Damn it, you guys!”

“Whoopsie-doodles!” said Midna, “It’s the Captain herself! Guess you just made our decision for us!”

Callum and Tarika rose from the underbrush as well, only Eron still cowered, out of sight behind his mother and the bushes.

“Oop, she’s got *backup*,” laughed Janus. “A freak and a half-freak! Family outing?”

“So, you slithered out of yer hole tae off me,” Rayla barked. “Well Isca’s right, fightin’ me is gonna do nothin’ but get you in more trouble! Be smart and walk!”

“Listen to her,” jeered Isca. “Still so cock-sure of herself even though I can hear her bones creak from here! You’re not the same person, Captain!”

With that, Midna flung a throwing knife at Rayla who slapped the projectile out of the air with the flat of her blade. The Dragon Guard took stock of her foes, deciding that the knife-wielder would be the first to go. The others were going to fight hand-to-hand rather than from a distance.

Callum, meanwhile, took aim at Isca who was advancing on him. His right drew his sword while his left cut a rune into the air.

Suddenly, Janus started screaming and pointed into the underbrush where two green eyes were glowing. A soulfang serpent raced into the clearing, making a beeline for the muscular earthblood who evaded its attack narrowly, shrieking all the while.

Rayla slashed at Midna who vaulted backwards out of the way while throwing another blade. Again, the Dragon Guard deflected her attack.

Isca had dodged Callum’s roaring mini-whirlwind. The seasoned fighter

bore down on her enemy with intent, letting their blades crash against each other.

Tarika was doing her best to stay out of harm’s way, her eyes pinned to the Soulfang chasing after Janus. Sparks flew as Midna’s knives bounced off Rayla’s pearlescent pauldrons.

“Still so nimble!” said the mercenary appreciatively.

“Still so dumb!” Rayla snapped.

Midna’s eyes snapped to Tarika and Rayla knew right away what she would do. Three knives flew from Midna’s fingers toward her daughter, who was totally unaware of the danger.

Rayla leapt sideways.

With a disgusting crunch, the weapons dug into her shoulder and chest. Pain exploded over the Captain’s body.

“Mum!” yelled Tarika, losing her focus.

The serpent vanished. Janus, who was in the process of climbing a tree, hadn’t noticed yet.

Rayla staggered to a halt, her teeth grinding. “Your fight’s with me! That was a cheap shot!” she hissed. Her right lost all strength and dropped the switchblade it held.



“They tend to work on suckers,” smiled Midna and lifted her hand to attack again. A small, dark shape dropped from the branches of a nearby tree and crashed into the fighter, taking her down with it.

Meanwhile, Callum and Isca had worn each other out dodging the others’ attacks. The human parried another strike, then drew a fiery rune. Isca’s eyes widened.

“Hey!! This is a forest!” she protested.

“Is that *right*?” Callum said and loosened a firebolt in the Earthblood’s direction. Isca dodged but suddenly saw stars when the flat of Rayla’s blade hit her square in the forehead.

“Thanks, Rayla!”

“Ye’re welcome, love!”

Janus was still preoccupied with the snake that had escaped his view, but he was starting to wonder if it hadn’t slithered off for good. He climbed off the tree, still looking around, and reached for his quarterstaff. The tip of a switchblade swung into his vision and he froze.

“Leave that holstered, you’re done!” panted Rayla.

Over her left shoulder, Janus saw Tarika and Eron kneeling on Midna, who was screaming insults and kicking her feet helplessly while the young woman bound her hands with a length of rope net. Beyond her wounded right, Callum had just finished tying up Isca.

Rayla’s foe smirked, but raised his arms in surrender. “You look terrible, Captain. Caught a few poisoned throwing knives?”

Rayla used her outstretched sword to lift the man’s chin and smiled at him, smug and angry, “I’m not worried. I’ve got *backup*!”

*

When the world swam back into focus, it was dark and a little stuffy. Rayla groaned and made to sit up, but a warm, slender hand on her shoulder kept her settled into the sheets.

“Hey, mum... relax, you’re safe,” whispered Tarika, tears of relief in her eyes. “We brought you home to the Grove...”

A second later, her daughter had thrown her arms around her mother’s neck and started sobbing into her shoulder. “You were out for two days! I thought you were gone fer good!”

“I’m fine, Rike,” smiled Rayla and rubbed the young woman’s back. “Thank you for all your help. The snake was a nice touch.”

“Right? The guards found the real one and got rid of it; but for a big guy like that he sure was scared of a fake snake!” Tarkia laughed tearfully, then tightened her embrace as her voice went rough. “Mum, I gotta tell you somethin’. I should’ve told ye before, but... I was so raw...”

Rayla’s heart suddenly ached. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

The young woman leaned back into her chair and wiped away her tears, then took a deep breath. “Long story short, I fell hard for this guy called Keane. When we got to the point where we made actual *plans*.” Tarika blinked away more tears. “I told him who you were, you know, cause I’d be bringin’ him around tae meet you and he lost it. He told me he thought I was cute with my ‘kid horns’, but that I’m a *freak* and that he’s *disgusted* he ever felt anythin’ for me! He was... this gentle, carin’ soul... right up till the moment he figured out... *what I was*.”

Her mother sat up and pulled Tarika’s head into her lap. She started tousling her hair. “You never had a conversation with him? About who yer parents are? How come you never told us about him?”

“Everyone knows me like that! ‘Tarika, daughter of the legendary Dragon Guard and human mage!’ It was nice to just... be *me* fer once!” Tarika scoffed. “That’s also why I didnae tell you about him. You’d butt in. You always do.”

“Right. Just did it again. I just gotta ask questions all the time.” Rayla frowned.

“Yea. You were so pushy...” Tarika mumbled. “So now you know. These past two days... I was worried you’d... you know, *die* thinkin’ I didnae wanna tell you thin’s.”

A moment of tender silence passed between the two before Rayla said, “I’m so sorry, Rike. I didnae want you to go get married all by yerself. And I’m not leavin’ you now, either, if that’s what you want. I’ll talk to yer Da if you don’t wanna tell the tale again.”

Tarika got up and shrugged. Her long hair obscured her face, but her hands were busy wiping away tears. “I’ll tell him later. Right now, I figure they wanna see how you are. We’ve been takin’ turns watchin’ you so the others can grab a couple of hours of sleep. I’m gonna get them.”

A moment later, Callum and Eron burst through the door dressed in pajamas. The boy jumped on the bed to hug his mother while Callum simply bent down to kiss her. Tarika settled back into her chair next to the bed.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” he murmured and squeezed her hand.

“Oh, I’m grand,” she replied. Her gaze wandered over her family and finally caught her husband’s calm smile.

It was moments like this, when her own emotions roiled, that she loved him like the first moment. So much of what was happening to her children felt like it was her fault, somehow, like she had failed to

make the world right for them. Callum would hear what had happened to Tarika and he would figure out a way for them all to be okay. More than anything, he was her anchor in all the turbulent waters she had navigated—both as a mother and a Captain.

With tears in her eyes, she pulled them all close and whispered, “I love you all.”



PIGMENT

by Spontaneite

The first time Callum was introduced to the concept of elvish pigment was, ostensibly, by Rayla's skin. He'd noted the marks under her eyes in the same hurried, panicked glance that picked out the horns, the ears, the alarming points of the weapons in her hands...

He wondered about them, of course, but in the first frantic two weeks of their acquaintance, there really wasn't a lot of time to ask about it. Not until the Storm Spire, when he sat mulling over the flight-runes on Ibis' wings, and how they might have come to be there.

"...So, I've been wondering," he said to Rayla, apropos of nothing, while she was tending to her equipment. She looked up as he began to speak, the armour momentarily forgotten. "Those...markings you have, the ones on your face—and the ones a lot of other elves seem to have—what *are* they?"

She blinked, and for a moment, her fingers rose to her face, as though only just remembering the marks were there. "They're pigment?" she offered, squinting at him a little. "...Is that a trick question, or...?"

"No, really, I have no idea what they are," he assured her. "I was never sure if they were tattoos, or...weird elf birthmarks, or something. But—pigment? Does that mean it's like...ink? How do you

get them on?" Tattoos, as he understood them, involved needles. He *hoped* elven pigment didn't involve needles.

For a moment, Rayla stared at him, looking decidedly nonplussed. "You...paint them on?" she explained, still thrown. "With a brush? And then they stay there for a while. Half a year, maybe. Depends on how good your pigment is."

"Huh," Callum mused. For a moment, he was tempted to press further, to ask about the intricacies of various pigments and the application thereof...but he'd been asking for a reason, after all, and his attention remained there.

If they were *painted on*...then that boded well. That meant that it was something that he could do, if only for the presence of the pigment and a brush.

It wasn't much later that, after a guilty rummage through Ibis' things, Callum stood at the pinnacle of the Storm Spire and painted flight-runes onto his skin. *That* was his first true introduction to the pigments of elves. As an artist, he couldn't help but marvel at it. The pigment was white, yet it entirely obscured the darker colour of his skin with only a single, easy stroke. Only one layer, and it was solidly opaque. It glowed a little—then settled utterly dry, clean, and steadfast upon his arms.

For a moment, he spared a thought to wish that his paints could be like that. He'd dabbled in every form of art medium he could get his hands on over the years, and he'd never worked with any pigment like this one. It would be *gorgeous* to paint with.

But then he was too distracted trying to fly to think about art any longer, and that was the last mind he paid to pigment for a while.

*

After the battle of the Storm Spire, he prevailed upon the use of a

finer, neater brush, and filled in the edges of his flight-runes until the shape of each was perfect and immaculate. Ibis watched him with a critical eye, and nodded.

“The spell will come easier if the runes are tidy,” he said, approvingly. “You’ll need to re-apply the pigment every three months. Any longer than that and it will begin to fade—which isn’t so great an issue when the marks are merely aesthetic, but with *runes*...”

“I can see how you wouldn’t want these fading, no,” Callum said ruefully, and accepted the little bottle of white pigment with a murmur of gratitude. He tucked it into his things for the next time he and Rayla went travelling, and she smiled at him.

“Packing your pigment for the journey, Callum?” she remarked, a little teasing. “Think we’ll be gone that long, do you?”

He laughed, and shrugged, glancing down at one of his arms. “I guess it’s just in case, really. I shouldn’t need to touch them up again for months, but...you never know. Wouldn’t want to end up flightless for some reason.”

“I suppose you *are* a tad obsessed with flying, now,” she agreed, as if she wasn’t always finding excuses for him to sweep her up into the sky for another flight. She reached out, absentminded, and trailed a fingertip around the curve of one rune with the trace of a smile on her lips. “Still, if it came down to it, you could always borrow mine.”

He glanced up at her, startled. “Your pigment?” he checked, eyes settling on the marks beneath her eyes. “I didn’t know you had any with you.”

“I don’t. Need to pick some up from Ethari, when we visit,” she said, succinctly, and he supposed that was another reason for their stopping at Silvergrove on the way to Katolis. How long had it been, since she last refreshed her pigment? Did she need to do it again

soon, or was she just planning for the future?

He stared at her for a moment, contemplating her, feeling his heart flutter with a familiar warmth. If her markings had faded at all since he met her, it wasn’t immediately obvious to him. They looked as clear and lovely as ever; a natural part of her face. It was strange to think of what she might look like without them.

Rayla eyed him, when he’d stared a little too long and smiled a little too softly, and huffed at him. Her cheeks pinked a little, the colour darkening her markings. “What are *you* looking at?” she muttered to him, a touch self-conscious. Rather than look away, he smiled at her all the wider, and captured the hand she had on his arm to plant a kiss on its fingers.

“You,” he said, very contentedly, and watched with pleasure as her face coloured and her fingers twitched beneath his touch.

“Dumb prince.” She sighed, a smile spreading unbidden and affectionate across her lips. It was beautiful, so of course he kissed that too. He felt the widening of that smile against his mouth, and lingered there for as long as she’d let him before she prodded him away to finish packing.

She gave his arms a strange look, though, when he next bared them. Appraising, almost, with a narrow-eyed sort of consideration. “... What?” He asked, when she’d been staring long enough to warrant the question.

“Your runes are...neat,” she said, tone as considering as her eyes. “Tidy.” She shook her head then. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, with all the art you do. Of *course* you’d be good at painting skin-pigment.” He eyed her, because there was clearly more to this observation than just surprise that he’d managed some tidy brushwork, but all she said when he asked was “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

He didn't believe her, obviously. Not with the way she kept shooting half-considering looks at him when she thought he wasn't looking. But he didn't press her, and she didn't mention whatever was on her mind. In time, he forgot about it.

Until they were back in the Silvergrove.

*

Rayla asked Ethari, and within the minute he was pressing a small dark bottle and a fine brush into her hands. "I did wonder if you needed any," he said, as she turned the glass over and the indigo liquid swirled around within. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," she agreed, pocketing the vial and the brush both. "It'll start fading soon. So...thanks."

He nodded at her, all warmth and familial affection. "Not a problem. Did you want me to help with that while you're here?"

She hesitated, then, and for a moment...for a moment, her eyes slid to Callum, who'd been watching them idly over the top of his sketchbook. "...I'm good," she settled on, eventually, and if there was anything particularly knowing about Ethari's smile then, Callum didn't notice it.

He kept drawing, content in that *she* was content, and happy to be in her home under happier circumstances than the first.

But then, later: "I wanted to ask you something," Rayla said, abruptly, when it was just the two of them in what was ostensibly her childhood room. It had been adapted over the years for a growing teenager, but still maintained hints of the past lingering within its walls. He spotted a child's doodle of a shadowpaw etched into the grain of the dresser, and suppressed a smile.

He turned to her, eyes crinkling a little at the thought of a tiny

rambunctious Rayla who scrawled over the walls and furniture. "Yeah?" he responded, a little distracted, as he wondered if there were perhaps any baby or childhood portraits in residence somewhere. He should ask Ethari. If there were any to be found, surely he'd know.

That distraction fled the instant she spoke. "Will you paint my pigment for me?" she asked, directly, and his eyes shot to her at once. At his expression, she added, "You don't have to. But it needs doing soon, or it'll start fading faster." She paused, looking a little more tentative as she said, "If you don't want to, Ethari can—"

"No," he blurted, clumsy, then scrambled to say "I mean, *yes*, I mean—I mean I'd like that. To help. To, er. Paint your pigment on." He felt his face heat, in part from how he'd stumbled over the words, and in part because...well. He might not know a lot about elven pigment and elven markings, but he *was* fairly sure that they were... personal. That *painting someone's markings for them was personal*.

His reply settled her, and she huffed, lips twitching with familiar fondness. "...Good," she said, in the end, and surprised him by leaving the room without further word. He blinked after her, uncertain whether he was supposed to follow, but then she returned a bare few moments later with a towel and a wet cloth that she was already wiping her face with.

"Er," he offered, perplexed, as she dried her face off and set the towel and cloth both down. He didn't understand until she plucked the bottle of pigment from her dresser and pressed it into his fingers. "*Now?*" His voice was something of a squeak, and she rolled her eyes.

"When else?" she asked, procuring a brush and giving him that too. "We're setting off tomorrow. Now's best." She paused. "...That okay?"

Her voice had gone tentative again, and his chin jerked up, fingers tightening around brush and bottle as if worried she'd take them

away. “No, yeah, it’s okay,” he assured her, and then laughed, a little nervously. “I just...wasn’t expecting it.” He cleared his throat, and took a closer look at the brush. It was like the one he’d filled his own runes in with, fine and delicate and short enough that it didn’t seem liable to flick off in weird directions. “...So I just...paint this onto your face?” he asked, after a moment, feeling his cheeks heat for reasons he couldn’t quite put to words. It felt *special*, in a way that was hard to describe.

“That *is* how it works,” Rayla answered, dryly, and then tugged him by the rune-adorned arm until they were both sitting on the floor, towel and cloth at close remove. He supposed those were there in case of spillages, though considering how quickly elvish pigment took hold, he wasn’t sure how much good a towel would do. He wondered if there was some sort of solvent, magical or otherwise, that was up to the task of dissolving pigment like this.

“What happens if I make a mistake when I’m putting your pigment on?” He wondered aloud, only half directing it at her. “Do you just have to walk around with it on your face for months?”

She snorted, and shook her head. “Nah. There’s pigment-remover for that.”

A little tension eased from his shoulders. “Oh, good,” he sighed, relieved. “That’s much less pressure, then.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Just paint my face, Callum.”

He chuckled at her, a little nervously, and uncapped the bottle. The liquid inside was so much darker than the pigment he used, and bizarrely true in its colour. Usually, inks tended to look much darker than their actual colour when they were in the bottle. It was only when you painted them onto a page that you could see how light and bright they were. This, though...it was just solid, liquid indigo, as if someone had distilled the concept of the colour of Rayla’s markings and spilled it into a bottle. “This would be *amazing* to

paint with,” he murmured, somewhat distractedly, watching the pigment shimmer in the low light.

Rayla didn’t answer that, which was unusual enough that his eyes darted to hers, and found her looking strangely thoughtful. She shook her head, though, as if to dispel some thought, and started giving the pigment bottle and the brush some very meaningful looks. He laughed, softly, and obeyed the unspoken command; he dipped the brush in, drained off the excess, and then lifted it. It was dyed the same solid, true indigo—a colour that he was about to put onto her skin.

It hit him then, or at least started to; he looked between the brush and her face and felt his breath catch at—at *something*. It felt a little like panic, a little like wonder, a little like the breathless infatuation she always managed to inspire in him. For a moment, he didn’t know what to do with it, and just...stared at her, heart beating wildly at—at the *trust*, and the honour, that he couldn’t help but feel she’d given him.

She was looking impatient by the time he finally moved, and likely would have spoken if not for how he shuffled closer, until their knees were touching. Her mouth closed, watching him, eyes settling on his own as he reached towards her. His fingers brushed the edge of her jaw, feather-light, as tentative as he always was when he remembered that someone as amazing as *her* had deigned to be with someone like *him*. His breath caught in his throat as he lifted his hand, thumb tracing tenderly along a cheek that warmed beneath his touch.

He cupped her face in his hand, then, unable to resist the impulse, and she leaned into it without even thinking. Her eyes fell half-lidded for a moment, the smallest smile twitching at the edges of her lips, and he wanted to kiss her. That wasn’t what he was supposed to be doing, but—but he *wanted* to, and she was smiling at him, and her eyes were soft and warm in the quiet and low light of the room—

So, he kissed her, and she huffed an amused breath against his lips, lifting a hand to trail affectionate fingers along the side of his neck. "This doesn't feel like face-painting to me," she murmured to him, fond and teasing at once, and he wouldn't have been surprised for a moment if his heart stopped beating for the strength of how much he loved her. "Weren't you supposed to be doing something?"

He laughed, a little breathless, and the warmth of it spilled between them. "Yeah," he agreed, helplessly, drawing back with her fingers still warm on his neck and his hand still cupped to her cheek, and paused for a moment to treasure the sight of her *looking* at him like that. He couldn't believe how lucky he was that she loved him. He didn't think he'd *ever* believe it. "I'll just...get on that."

She withdrew her hand, and watched him. Waiting.

His fingers shifted on Rayla's face, moving to press his thumb gently to the side of the marking under her left eye. Pulling at the skin, ever-so-slightly, to allow for painting it more evenly. Another urge struck him, but this time he suppressed it. He could kiss her cheek-markings later. For now, he was supposed to be painting them. And so...

With an almost reverent care, he lifted the tip of the brush to her face, hovering just above her skin with a heady mixture of breathless wonder and breathless trepidation. He exhaled, softly, and felt her eyes upon him. Watching, warm and fond and expectant.

Finally, with the utmost care, he touched the brush to her skin.

She flinched a little at the touch so close beneath her eye, but he'd expected that. He held the brush steady and traced a slow, perfect line down her cheek, along the edge of the extant marking, like a dark border to the fading colour. And it was fading; he could see that now. It wasn't noticeable on its own, but with the contrast of the fresh pigment beside it, it was fully obvious that the old colour had begun waning.

With the brush to her skin, Callum's hushed awe fell in step with the breadth of his skill and practice. He'd never put brush to someone else's skin before, but that did nothing to diminish his skill. He *knew* brushwork, and he knew the delicacy needed for fine detail, and...and, in the end, this was *easy*. Just tracing around an existing marking, and filling it in. There could be nothing easier.

He drew the pigment across her skin in smooth, effortless lines. He traced the borders of her marking and then filled it in, up until when the brush began to run empty, and he had to go for the bottle again. The colour settled fast, immediate, and perfect upon her face, with that gorgeous fidelity he'd never seen in any other pigment or paint or ink in all his life. It was a pleasure to use it, and all the more that he was using it for *this*.

Callum fell half into an artist's trance for the remaining minutes it took to finish. He filled the left marking in, stark and perfect, then shifted his fingers tenderly to her other cheek, and repeated the process. When he was done, there was nothing but perfect lines and perfect colour upon a face that he loved.

He smiled, small and satisfied, and set the brush aside. "Done," he murmured, and leaned forward to press his forehead to hers, cradling her face in both hands. It felt strange, to risk touching her skin when he'd only just painted it. But that was the wonder of elvish pigment; it dried the moment it was applied, and permitted no possibility of smearing whatsoever. He stroked his thumbs beneath her eyes and felt more happy, more tender, more *loving* than he'd ever known. "Perfect," he murmured, reverential, the words meant for more than the pigment.

Her eyes blinked across from his own, and he loved them. Loved her. She brought her arms up and drew him closer, one hand splayed on the back of his neck. "Maybe I'll have you do me some new markings, someday," she murmured to him, in the end, a small and secret smile at the edges of her lips. He stared at her, spellbound, for

the three beats of his heart that lingered between her smile and her movement. She leaned in and closed the meagre distance between them, the kiss soft and sweet and all the more perfect for how dearly he adored her.

He imagined, for a second, drawing that ink-brush again along her skin. Imagined it between her fingers, along her arms, casting indigo whorls about her shoulders. He thought of new pigment, new markings, and the sheer *delight* of being the one who got to put them there. His heart fluttered. “I’d like that,” he said, against her lips, and she kissed him again.

“Good.” When she drew back, the markings were still stark and beautiful beneath her eyes, where *he’d* painted them. The sight of them left him a little breathless, even now, unable to shake the sense that he’d been afforded an enormous privilege, a gift of worth beyond measure.

Someday, he hoped, she’d afford him that gift again.

*

Callum saw the fruits of Rayla’s thoughtful consideration and furtive glances a while later, when July came around and he was startled from thinking about *her* birthday by the arrival of his own. She cornered him with palpable satisfaction, and gave him a parcel that she very clearly expected him to be delighted with.

She wasn’t wrong.

He unveiled an array of small bottles; thirty-six hues of true and perfect elvish pigment, distilled for the purpose of painting. He beheld them all with a nearly breathless joy, finding the little parcel of pigment-brushes, the bottle of solvent, the masking-fluid....

“You like it?” Rayla asked, with a broad and decidedly smug smile on her face. She clearly already knew the answer.

“I *love* it,” he pronounced, and set at once to trying them out.

The very first thing he painted was *her*. She watched him, and huffed as she saw the familiar lines of her own face taking form on the page, pleased and exasperated all at once. She never did seem to understand why he drew her so often, but that was okay. And, with these pigments...

The colours were spectacular, brighter and more intensely pigmented than anything he’d ever seen. He found himself utterly swept away in the delight of using them, and hours later, emerged from his artist’s trance to the completed work: Rayla in the early evening of the Silvergrove, her hair and eyes gleaming softly with the gentle illumination of the lights and moon-moths around her. It was one of the finest works he’d ever produced, and at the sight of it, he concluded the process of falling helplessly in love with Elvish pigment.

Rayla, for all her embarrassment at being painted, seemed to approve of it too. “You picked that up quickly,” she noted, handling the edges of the thick paper with the delicate care it deserved.

“These pigments are my new favourite thing,” he declared, arranging the bottles a little more tidily beside him. His eyes rested, a little consideringly, over another wide sheet of paper. He stared at it for a long while, growing quiet and solemn, and eventually reached out to take it.

He had his birthday traditions to observe, after all.

The second thing he painted with the elven pigments was his family portrait, atrophied and truncated by tragedy. There was no Sarai there, and hadn’t been for years. No Harrow, and that was a new pain. He felt the ghosts of their absence in the lines he didn’t draw, in the colours that never fell upon the page, in the voids of grief that they left in his life.

But there were new faces now, too.

With quiet, exquisite care, he drew himself. He drew Ezran, older now, wearing a mantle that had come for him too soon. He drew Bait in his brother's arms. He drew Aunt Amaya. And, tenderly: he drew Azymondias and Rayla. The outlines took form, and as the hours passed, elvish pigment filled them in.

In the end, he had his family portrait again. Changed, and echoing with its empty spaces, but...

Quiet, from her place beside him, Rayla slipped her hand into his own.

"Come on," She said, with the small but tender smile that he loved. "Zym has a present for you too. He'll be disappointed if he can't give it to you today."

Callum exhaled, and let her fingers tighten around his, pulling him up to his feet beside her. His own smile slipped onto his lips. "Then we'd better go find him," he said, casting a last glance at the portrait on the table. He didn't resist it when she tugged on his fingers, pulling him away.

With a strange, quiet serenity, he followed her out into the light.

*Because I love
you, Rayla. I
really do.*

ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

Dear Rayla,

I would want that in any world. I will find you in any universe, in any time and place and love you the best way I know how for as long as you'll have me.

one day, then every day.

I Love You,
Callum





@cyraenea



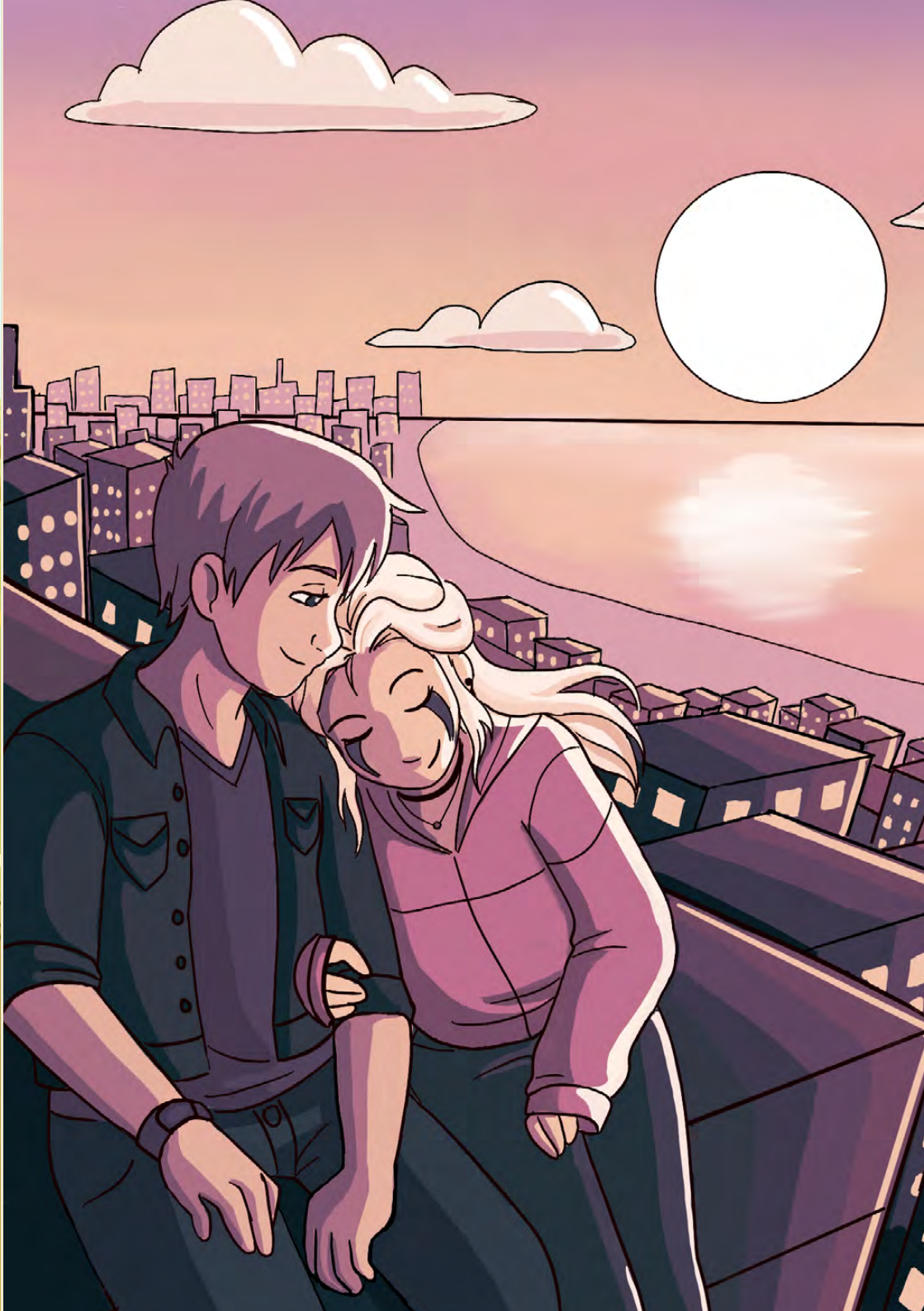


SOMEWHERE IN THE FOREST...



HELLO?
ANYONE HOME?















I'll cut your throat. That'll shut you up.

You're beautiful.















No Matter What

Script, Art and Designs by Tamika "Kuno" Williams
Flat Color by Miriiart

One lonely sunset, Luna resting on Rayla's lap...



Hey.

Hey...



I'm sorry about how things went with Runaan. I know it's not what you hoped for.

It's alright. It's not your fault.



I mean, it kind of is.

I'm the one who asked you to leave The Silvergrove and come with me.



It was my choice. Supporting you against Viren is more important, but... I ran away. I knew what I was doing. I knew how he'd take it.



...I just didn't think it'd hurt this bad...



Hey... even if he's angry with you right now doesn't mean it'll be forever. And I *love* having you here. I owe you for it, really.



You're not just the best dragon rider. You're a hero. My hero. And an amazing person. Rayla, Runaan will come around.

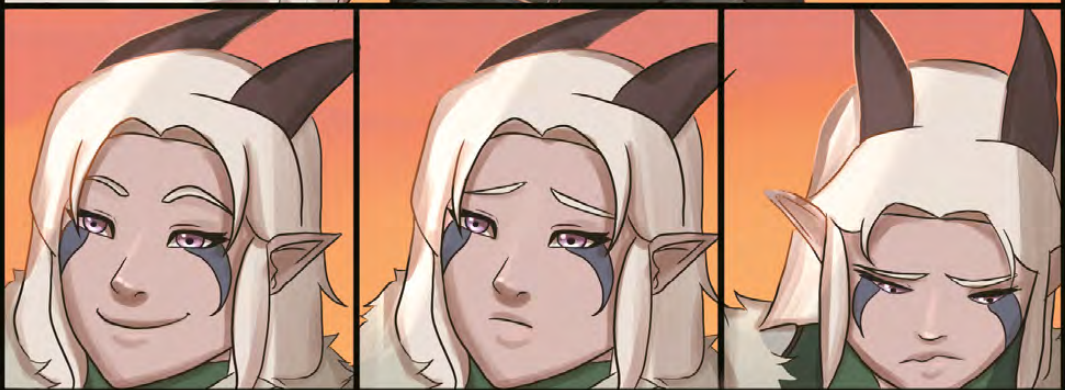
I just don't feel like I can even visit him or Ethari or... go home at all. What if they ghost me?

Then, that's their loss. But if you want to go back... you know I'd understand. And I'll be here for you no matter what.

No way. It took me years to be here with you.

I want to be here. And I don't regret you. No matter what.

Guess you're stuck with me, then... you'll get through this.



I know it hurts.

...if Soren comes over and sees me like this, I'm going to hit him.

Yeeeah... that's probably overdue, anyway.

End.

CHARMED

by Cyanide

I. *Introduction*

Outdoor markets were always so loud, Callum decided. It was one of his favorite things about them. There was always life if the tents were up and running. He played a few notes of his flute, carefully checking to see if anyone perked up.

He was on a mission to find a partner before they were all taken.

He played again, only to be interrupted by a group of children. They threw questions at him rapidly, but he knew what they wanted. Everyone always asked the same things.

“Yes, I’m a Charmer, the one that does the music. I’m looking for a Snake to perform with me, but dancers are hard to find this time of the year. Most of them have paired up already—” He laughed at their overlapping voices. “Yes, I can play a bit for you guys, but I have to get going soon!”

He began to breathe into his flute, rapidly tapping at the notes to get everyone’s attention. It wasn’t long before other Charmers and Snakes made their way to join him. He smiled at a few of the pairs that he’d recognized from his travels.

The beat picked up, and the musician-dancer duos began to walk down the separate merchant aisles. Someone slapped at drums, and

the music thrummed along in Callum’s veins.

A flash of white caught his attention, and he turned reflexively. He failed to realize he had stopped in his tracks, his instrument moments away from slipping through his hands.

A Moonshadow elf twirled to the variety of sounds, pale hair swaying. She was dressed in civilian clothes, not like any Snake he had ever seen. But he was enraptured by the fluidity of her movements, the contrasting angles and curves she flipped through effortlessly.

Her steps were light, but she very deliberately dragged her feet across the ground, making abstract clouds of dirt to make her shape hazy.

She fell into a crouch, weaving along the floor. As the music began to crescendo, she rose in time with it, like a real snake preparing to strike.

She glanced at him, noting the flute precariously hanging. His mouth had slipped open subconsciously, but he couldn’t look away, couldn’t bring himself to shift his focus.

She was strikingly organic, wholly enthralling without the extra adornments and clothes Snakes often carried with them.

She offered him a small smile as the music died out, flourishing her arms. Asking the audience to applaud him, even as her own chest heaved with her effort.

He remained rooted to the spot, amethyst eyes perusing him with barely veiled curiosity. Slowly, she began to shimmy a bit, gesturing to his flute.

Asking him to play with her.



He realized very suddenly that he was charmed, and he gave a small smile back.

She approached, keeping that same imaginary beat. She wrapped her hand around his wrist, tugging him to the center circle that had formed.

“Will you do another?” she asked, eyes wide and bright. “They’ve already begun tossing coins.” She glanced over at a makeshift collection plate next to where she had been dancing.

He licked his lips, nodding. He could do that. He played a few notes, wincing at how off-tune they sounded. He was nervous, although he’d performed hundreds, if not thousands, of times before.

But this was different.

This was the Xadian Eastern Front, the largest bazar on the continent.

And there was a possibility he had just found a Snake to pair up with him. All his other partners had been seasonal. There was a difficulty in building a solid relationship beyond performing, and they never stayed together long after.

He didn’t want to lose this stranger. She had a quality about her, a beautiful mystery like moonlight peeking through the clouds on an otherwise black night.

She placed a hand on his arm, giving it an encouraging squeeze. But he could feel the way her own fingers were trembling. She was just as anxious as he was for entirely different reasons. It seemed she was unused to being at the center of attention, eyes flicking around the gathered crowd.

“Just focus on me,” he told her.

Her smile was blinding, transforming the sharpness of her face.
“Let’s tell them a story they’ve never heard before.”

He thought of himself as midnight, a blank canvas for her to paint across just like the multitude of stars. They were given the ability to craft a universe, novel and unsure. But with time, he knew it would become a masterpiece.

They could do this.

He began to play, imagining the dark night. She was the twinkling lights, splattering across the sky to make their creation breathe with new life.

His heart pounded in time with her feet, sweat slipping down his forehead and neck.

When she slithered upwards, hands reaching at the sky, he played his last note. It was easily drowned out by the claps, and more money began to pile next to them.

She looked over at him, face red with exhilaration. He probably looked the same, skin prickling in a whirlwind of adrenaline. Trepidation and excitement were at war within his chest, making him lightheaded.

He had found his Snake.

Now if only she would agree.

The crowd dispersed slowly. People come up to talk to them both. Finally, when they were given enough room to breathe, he asked her to step aside so they could talk.

She laughed once they were situated in a shaded alley, wiping a hand across her brow. “That was incredible!”

“I’ve never done that before,” Callum admitted.

“And here I thought you were a Charmer,” she teased. “You certainly play like one.”

“I *am* a Charmer.” He cleared his throat. “Actually... I was wondering if you’d be willing to pair up as a Snake.”

She turned away, rubbing a hand across her neck. Tilted her head to the ground almost shyly. “I’m not an actual Snake. I just... I like dancing.”

He mimicked her earlier words. “You certainly danced like a Snake.”

Her eyes searched his face intently. He had half the mind to pull his bag closer to his chest, not used to the scrutiny.

“You think I could do it?” she asked slowly.

He snorted. “They loved you out there! You put trained Snakes to shame. While we travel, we can ask other Charmers and Snakes to help teach us if that’s what you’re worried about. There’s no real formal schooling, anyways. If you love it and if you practice enough, you can do it.”

Emotions warred across her face. “I’ve always wanted to be a dancer. I’d be making more money for my family than I do now. With just those two songs, I counted more than I had gotten in the past two months.”

He winced. “Snake Charming is a highly paid art. You wouldn’t think it because we move around so much. But the formal outfits are painfully expensive.”

“And... We’d compete at the annual Burrow Festival?”

“We have about a year to prepare. I wouldn’t call it a competition,”

he laughed, thinking back to the fest he had attended only a few weeks ago. “They *do* give out prizes, but it’s more about showing off how you’ve grown in skills. So, what do you say? Are you in?”

She offered her hand, both delicate and calloused. He took it readily, feeling the grains of dirt and sand. Convincing him this wasn’t a dream.

“I’m Rayla,” she said with a strange half-smile.

He couldn’t help his barking laugh filled with disbelief and relief. “I’m Callum. Pleased to meet you, partner.”

“*Partner*,” she said with a nod. “I like the sound of that.”

2. *Exposition*

Callum had decided very early on that it was strange to be travelling with someone so unused to the Snake Charmer culture. He didn’t mind it per se, but it was always jarring to be asked why he did things the way that he did. Especially when most of his answers were dissatisfactory by the faces she would make.

Her most recent question had left him nothing short of stunned.

“Hey, Cal? Why are we doing this?”

He glanced over at her in surprise. Did she not want to be paired up anymore? Was there an issue she had with the music he’d composed or the dance she’d created?

But he noticed the ways her hand clutched at the curtain as she peeked at the crowd. They had been travelling together for a little bit over half a year, but this was her first full performance.

Their first full performance.

She was dressed something reminiscent of a soulfang serpent, a snake crown placed delicately on her head. All along her arms were circlets to match. Her top was a glowing emerald, the rest a stark velvet black. A delicate red veil covered the length of her back.

All her jewelry and tassels dangled as she turned to him, eyes wide. She asked once more, “Why are we doing this?”

“Because Del Bar asked us to perform. We’ve done this plenty of times now.”

He had no worries about her capabilities. She was brilliant and talented. A natural. He was afraid of *himself*, and how his music would ever compare to the language her body spoke.

She played idly with the dangling jewels falling beyond her shoulders. “Maybe you have. I’ve never been in formal wear yet! I feel so... Stiff? I don’t think I can do this. I should just go home and—”

“Alright, that’s enough of that talk,” he said, placing his flute into its holder. He tugged her hands away from the growing crowd, noting the way her rings connected to a piece of fabric. It was a beautifully designed outfit.

His was far simpler, layers of black and green separated by bright red stitching. He never wanted to outshine the visual star of the show.

“If you *really* want to back out now, I’m not going to stop you. But if you’re just afraid, then I won’t let you walk away. You say you love to dance, and I see it every time we practice. I get self-doubt. But you should at least try it before you decide to walk away.”

“You can’t say that! You’re not scared,” she argued, gripping his palms.

“I’m terrified each time I lift my flute to my lips. But I try and use it

to make me better, not stop me. We're in this together. You're not alone, Rayla."

She looked up at him, doubt written across her small smile. "You're not alone either. I'll do it, but because I can't stand the thought of you going out there by yourself. What's a Charmer without their Snake?" she joked.

"A lonely musician," he answered seriously. "People have come around the world to watch you debut. We've got this." He gestured to the stage that was steadily quieting down.

Rayla shook her head, wrapping an arm around his as the announcer listed off their names and musical piece. "They've all come to watch us. We're a team. Remember, *partner?*"

Callum laughed, adjusting one of her hairs properly. "Partner."

They walked on stage together, bowing as they entered the center. The lights shut off, and he shuffled back best he could until he felt a small notch in the floor. Most routines he didn't do much aside from weave back and forth across the stage with the Snake. This was no different.

He hummed the melody, and some of her beads moved in response.

She was ready.

He hummed again before inhaling deeply and playing the notes on his flute. Moody lights crept up and he watched as Rayla began to move glancing at him every so often as if to ground herself. But she didn't need the encouraging nods he gave her. She captivated the audience as readily as she had captivated him, her passion outshining small technical mistakes.

She leapt across the stage, tumbled back and forth. He glanced at the sea of faces, noting the open mouths and wide eyes.

The music sped up as he tried to suppress a smile. Callum wouldn't go so far to call himself extraordinary, but they were brilliant together.

As the song ended and the curtains fell, she spun around and threw herself into his arms. He spun in a circle as she laughed.

"That was amazing! Can we do it again? I thought formal wear was stuffy, but *wow* does it make me feel like a real dancer."

He chuckled and put her down. "You *are* a real dancer."

"Yeah, but now I look *and* feel it!"

As they exited into the night, she shivered. There would be a feast later in their honor, and they needed to get ready. He stopped her, placing his cape around her shoulders. Their hands brushed, and he couldn't help the burning of his face.

She looked up at him but quickly shifted her gaze. "I-I'll see you tonight?"

He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, of course."

3. *Development*

They started their second year together. The Burrow Festival was interesting, and they nearly won. Both were excited to have been able to perform together, accolades be damned. They had each taken quick detours. One to her home and one to his.

But when they reunited, his heart swelled. It had only been a few weeks, but he had missed her. It was nice to know she was safe.

He came up short, resisting the urge to rush over to her. But then she laughed at his expression and was hurrying over to where he

was, footsteps quick and light. He was helpless to do the same. When they came together, it was a mess of limbs and a rush of words.

“I feel like it’s been forever! I—”

“It’s been so weird! I kept trying to talk to you, but you weren’t there—”

“And then I tried to—”

“But you weren’t—”

They pulled back, both stopping and laughing at themselves.

“Hi Callum,” Rayla said, her smile beautiful and wide.

He was sure he had a goofy smile on his face, too. “Hello Rayla.”

She hummed and pushed his shoulder playfully. “I think I missed you!”

He poked her pointed ear. “I think I missed you, too.”

“So,” she said, nearly buzzing with excitement.

“So?”

“What’s next! Where are we going? What are we doing?”

Watching the bright amethyst of her eyes scan across his form, taking in their surroundings rapidly, he felt a strange feeling settle in his gut.

It all made sense now.

He *liked* her. And had for *months*. What would happen now? Should he tell her?

But she had already gripped his wrist, tugging him towards a restaurant. “Let’s eat and catch up for a bit, okay? It’s nice to be back together. I feel like I’m whole again.” Her laugh was high pitched this time as she pushed some hair behind her ear.

But he nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.”

As she spoke of their time apart, he couldn’t help but soak in the sight of her, a new lens over his eyes following his revelations.

He would tell her. One day, just not now. Rather, he wanted to enjoy their reunion, bask in the warmth that seemed to follow her around.

4. *Recapitulation*

It was a still night. The only sounds were Rayla’s steps amongst the grass and Callum’s gentle flute drifting through the air.

The firelight covered their world in a cozy orange and kept them warm against the occasional biting wind.

She was fussing over something, maybe the positioning of her arms? She looked over at him, face breaking into a gentle smile. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

He swallowed thickly. “I just... I’m charmed,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

“Charmed? By what?” She raised a brow.

“You.” He plucked at weeds aside his legs and then shrugged. They would be attending the next Burrow Festival soon. They’d been companions for almost two years now, and there was no time like the present. “I’m charmed by you.”

“I—What? But I’m the Snake. I’m the one that’s supposed to be charmed by my Charmer?”

“Well, it would seem the roles have reversed.” He struggled to gain the courage to look at her face. “Ever since I first saw you, I’ve been caught up in your magic, you know.”

She rushed to his side and kneeled. Warm hands held his face, forcing him to look at her. “And you think I wasn’t? You’ve always supported me, always listened. Pushed me even when I was scared.”

He laughed, placing a hand over one of hers. He then hugged her to him, breathing deeply. “I’m in love with you, Rayla,” he said into her shoulder.

He felt her palms against his back, fingers scrunching his shirt. “Well, you’re in luck because I’m in love with you, too, Callum.” He could hear the smile in her voice. “I have been for a long time now, I think. I was just... Scared. I didn’t want to lose you because I couldn’t separate my feelings.”

“Me, too. But I was tired of not saying anything. Especially when you’re all I can think about sometimes. Makes it difficult to focus on anything else.”

“I know the feeling,” he confirmed.

He pulled back, once more caught in the fierceness of her gaze. She leaned up slightly, pressing her lips into his. His eyes slid shut of their own accord, trying to savor the moment as best he could. She was everywhere, filling his senses.

He ran a hand through her hair as he moved back, marveling at the way the silvery strands reflected the light. “You’re so beautiful. Lucky would not even begin to describe where I’m at.”

She tapped a finger against her chin. “Hm... Let’s call it... Fate!”

“Fate?” He furrowed his brow.

“Yeah! It was meant to be. We were meant to be. Partners until the end, right?”

He kissed her once more, unable to stop the content feeling sinking into his bones. “Partners. I like the sound of that.”

She smirked, resting her head against his. “Me too.”

NIGHTS FROM HOME:

EARLY PREVIEW OF THE RUBY STORM FROM THE LOVE AMONGST THE
DRAGONS SERIES

by Tamika Kuno Williams

“Ciceros, you’re *snoring*.”

Ciceros grunted at him and rolled onto his side, his slumber not to be disturbed by one human bumbling in the dark. Even if that human happened to be his human. Callum rolled his eyes and continued sketching. Trying to sketch anyway. It was harder to sketch at night, but the full moon was bright enough that he could just about make out his drawing of the Moonshadow Forest.

Night in Xadia was different.

Not bad. Different.

In Katolis, Callum hadn’t had a dragon sleeping at his side. Nor did the moon used to remind him so much of a fellow dragon rider he probably should have been visiting by now. It had become their nightly routine for the past six months since he came to the Moonshadow Dragon Base. But instead, tonight he sat on the deck, wood and steel ornately carved in typical Moonshadow fashion. Everything symmetrical. Everything timeless.

The opposite of his kingdom’s uneven tower sigil. His former kingdom’s? He didn’t know.

Callum stopped trying to fight his distracted mind and put the book down. It wasn’t why he was out here anyway. He kept trying to

distract himself. Kept trying not to read it. He pulled the letter from his sketchbook and unfolded it. It was worn, the corners folded or torn off all together. He glanced at the signature.

Miss you,

Claudia.

Ciceros growled.

“You do that every time I read this. Don’t you think you’re being a little judgemental of me at this point?”

Ciceros rolled back onto his belly to look at Callum, electric blue eyes boring into him. His great dragon as grey like thunderclouds. Dark like night. The crescent spines following the curve of his back, curled in annoyance. Callum pouted. “Look, I know it smells like her. You don’t have to like Claudia. I’d never ask you to do that.”

Maybe ask him not to attack her on sight if they ever saw her again.

If.

Callum read the letter even as Ciceros rumbled. He reached out and ran a hand over Cicero’s scales just between his eyes. Ciceros allowed the comfort.

Dear Callum,

I hope this letter finds you well. And safe. I hope it finds you without anyone finding out about it. You probably have questions about how I found you, but that’s not important now. We miss you. I miss you. Home is different without you and Ez. I know Dad made it... difficult, but I hate the way things ended between all of us. I know there’s a way to make it all work again. I hate to say it, but I didn’t realize how much I’d wish you were here until now. It’s quiet without Ez making a ruckus with the baker and I keep expecting you to just be around the corner watching out

for me. You always did that.

Wish it could be like that again.

On the back is a little spell for you if you ever get a chance to try it. Just in case you want to feel a little closer to home again. Where I'm at.

Miss you,

Claudia

The first time he read it, the letter made him angry. He almost burned it. But at the time, Callum had been angry at everything and it had taken a long time to not just be mad at the world when he and Ez were bouncing around the human kingdoms.

Now, he couldn't bring himself to part with it.

"What are you doing out here?"

At the top of the short set of stairs, Rayla watched him. Callum forgot about the letter, just for a moment. He always got distracted by her white hair at night. She usually wore her long hair over one shoulder or the other, her shoulders framed by her fur hood. But tonight only the moonlight framed her pale face and she was dressed in her night clothes. He smiled, even if her violet eyes spelled suspicion. The markings on her face always made her negative emotions stand out a bit more.

"Just reading a letter I still have. That's all."

"A letter? From who?"

"Claudia sent it to me a long time ago."

Her eyes narrowed. "Claudia? That human girl? The dark mage?"

She came down the stairs and joined him. "Yes, that human girl." He chuckled a little. Grumpy Rayla was still cute Rayla. "What are you doing up?"

Not that he didn't know. She eyed him half-wary, half-hiding her feelings as she looked away. "You didn't come see me."

"Sorry. I just... wanted some time to think." He smiled. "I didn't forget about you though. I was thinking about what I would ask you tomorrow night."

"...You could ask me right now." Rayla reached over and cupped his jaw with one hand.

Callum took her hand from his jaw and pressed it against his chest in promise. "Tomorrow night."

He remembered the letter from Claudia and let her hand go.

Beside him, he could feel Rayla staring. He looked at her.

"If you need a night to yourself," she started, standing up. "I underst—"

"No, no. It's nothing like that. I just—I—" He sighed. She let him pull her back down beside him, so close their thighs were touching. Callum took her hand again and just laced his fingers together with hers even as his chest tightened. He wanted her there, actually. Rayla would understand. She always did and when she didn't, she tried.

Words could not describe what her presence meant to him.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

He was looking up at the sky. A Xadian sky.

“I miss it.”

His chest unclenched.

“Your home,” Rayla said after a beat.

Again, he breathed through his nose and exhaled. He nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Even if I love having you here. If I could take Viren out myself, I would, but...”

Callum almost laughed. “Thanks. An assassin’s answer?”

“That’s my answer to *anyone* who hurts you like that.”

Callum looked at her. Searched her face, the determined curve of her mouth. She meant it. Of course she did. If the situations were reversed, he’d feel the same. He might slip and let Ciceros act on his more protective instincts. Normally, it was Callum who kept Ciceros in line because, by all accounts, the Tempest Crescentback was a temperamental breed and Ciceros fit that description well. Even now, the dragon was rolling around trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in. He was grumpy about feeling the need to follow his human around when it was clear Callum was not going to Rayla’s room where Ciceros’ own mate, Luna, was likely waiting.

“Thanks, Rayla. Is it terrible that makes me feel better?”

She touched his cheek with the back of her free hand. “I have that effect on you. I am your best friend in the entire world, remember?”

He did laugh this time.

She frowned and took her hand back. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing... you just know you’re way more than that to me.” He leaned back into her touch. Her face softened and she let

him, but it was wary again.

That always wary, beautiful face.

“Then what would you call me?” She arched a brow.

“...I don’t know. There are no words for you. I’d call you Rayla.”

She said nothing, but rested her chin on his shoulder and got comfortable. He nudged her with his cheek.

“...So—” she said. Oh, here they go. “—A letter from Claudia.”

“A letter that’s literally *years old*,” Callum said. I’ll have you know I’d keep a letter from any of my friends. I’d keep your letters if you ever wrote any.”

Rayla wrinkled her nose. “It’d rather just find you and tell you what I have to say.”

He would have shrugged if she wasn’t making a place for herself on his shoulder and against his arm. She was just tall enough to get comfortable in this exact position, curled up along his side.

“...It’s the only thing I have left from Katolis,” he said softly.

He felt the weight of her chin leave his shoulder to look at him. Any annoyance — or even a trace of jealousy, perhaps — was gone.

“...Oh. Callum, I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay, I know,” he assured her. “It’s...it’s complicated. I remember when I first read it, I wanted to just throw it away. Get rid of it. I hated how tone deaf it felt after she and Soren just let Viren take over Katolis. She sent me a letter in exile.”

“To get you to do what?”

Her tone was slightly sharper then. His smile was tight. There she was.

She always understood.

“To come home.”

“Callum, it was a trap and you know it.”

He let out a sigh and looked back out at the expanse of the forest, the trees a dark blanket over the horizon. “I know. I know it was. But sometimes—”

“Callum...”

“—Sometimes... Sometimes, I just wonder, you know. What if it wasn't? What if I was *wrong*? What if I was just hurting and—”

Rayla grabbed his chin and made him look at her. They were still entwined together. He focused on her bright, steely, violet eyes. “She was one of the people that hurt you. I remember that day. I was there with you. I was there when she stood aside and let Viren take the crown from Ezran and I was there when she sided with her father by not helping you. Then, she sends you a letter telling you to come home? I'll take my chances and call that a trap.”

“...But what if it isn't?”

Her face fell. “*Callum...*”

He stood up and started pacing. The side where she was felt cold. Callum picked up the letter and looked at it again. “What if it's not a trap though and she's being serious? I mean... Rayla, Claudia was my friend for *years*—”

“I don't care if she was your friend for a long time. She—”

“Of course you don't care! It wasn't *your life*!”

Silence sat between them. Only the night stood vigilant. Ciceros picked up his head to watch them.

Callum rubbed his face. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I just... I'm frustrated.”

“No, you're right.” She stood up and approached him. She put a finger to his lips to stop him from replying. “You *are* right, Callum. It wasn't my life and I didn't get chased out of my home.”

She said it so plainly. So bluntly. It was a relief and a blow.

“Some days... some nights, I just get hung up on it,” he said. “I can't help it. I don't even have the scarf I used to wear. I have my sketchbook from my stepdad and I have this letter. That's all I have from... then. Sometimes, it still gets to me just how different my life is.”

Her voice was quiet. “I know. And... I can't make your old life come back. I can't make your stepdad come back, but I can try to make this new life as good as I can? I hope...”

Callum smiled at her. “You do. Life after you, is still...”

He searched for the word as she searched him for an answer. His head shook slightly.

“What?”

He still got like this even after years of knowing her. “I don't *want* to know a life without you.”

“Now, you're just flattering me.”

Callum laughed, but he still pulled her into a hug, resting his chin

on her head. "Thanks for coming out to see me."

"I don't feel like I was much help, but sure. I'll always come out here for you. To help however I can. I wanted to check on Luna anyway. I think she stole the kitchen utensils again."

They pulled back, but stayed in the embrace. She held him by the crook of his elbows and looked at him pleadingly. "I won't ask you what is in that letter. But I know you. And I know she left you something that left your best interests behind. Just... *please*, don't do anything stupid."

He reached up and brushed her hair back from her face. "Claudia's in the past. I'll probably never see her or Soren again, anyway. I'll probably never see *Katolis* again."

"You'll go back. One day."

He smiled at her again and pulled her into another hug. His hand brushed down her hair. "You should go back to bed. You patrol in the morning, don't you?"

She put a hand on his chest. "I'll be up anyway. Luna will see to that."

But she pulled away, trailing her fingertips from his hand.

"Why did Ciceros follow you up here?"

Ciceros obviously heard his own name in the conversation and grunted in his sleep. Callum chittered. "I think he thinks I'll accidentally walk off the deck, honestly. For some reason, he doesn't trust me around open spaces without him."

Rayla walked over to Ciceros and rubbed his head. "Someone has to take care of you when I'm not around."

Callum tried to hide his smile. "Ha ha. Very funny."

"What?" she asked innocently. It quickly turned wicked. "Am I wrong?"

"Listen, we can't *all* know our dragons since we were children."

She'd told Callum the story before. Luna was a gift from Runaan and a lifelong companion. Nobody loved Luna more than Rayla. She was the first face Luna saw coming out of her egg, apparently.

That was a nearly fifteen year bond to Callum's not quite four.

Still, Ciceros was like a warm cloud to Callum. A dark cloud that shot out lightning when he was mad, but a welcome presence nonetheless. It was the farthest thing he ever thought would be in his life.

He owed Ciceros and Rayla to each other, really.

Without either of them, the other would not be in his life.

"Luna picked you out of hundreds of humans to be specifically curious about. She liked you. Good judge of character, my girl."

Callum smiled. He supposed that was true. Luna was ever mischievous and ever curious, especially when she had first met Callum. Somehow, she decided this human was a good human for her elf to meet. She happened to be right.

"Is that you explicitly complimenting me for once?"

"This is me leaving you with a good note to go to bed on. If I go to sleep, are you still going to be up all the hours of the night? You should sleep. Last time I checked, you're on the noon patrol."

"Noon is a lot later than dawn. I'll be fine."

“I love how that doesn’t answer my question.”

Callum reached out to touch her cheek with his thumb. “I’ll be fine. I promise. I just... need a minute.”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

She gave him a meaningful look as she left, all the worry she had for him conveyed in a single glance. He reassured her with a smile as best he could.

She went back inside and Callum sat back down next to Ciceros.

He looked toward the sky. Turning over the letter, he looked at Claudia’s final words to him.

At the spell she left for him.

ACROSS SHARED SKIN

by Spontaneite

When Callum was born, Sarai pored over every inch of his skin by candle-light until she found it. A tiny, diminutive patch of discoloured skin on the back of his tiny, diminutive left hand.

It was an interesting skin tone. Pale and purplish, almost, plainly evident against the ruddy colour of his newborn body. She wondered if, across whatever distance separated them, her son’s soulmate had noticed the corresponding shift on their own hand. She wondered how much older they were. She wondered many things that, in the end, only the passage of years would be able to answer. But for now, there were observances to meet.

She fetched a pen, and in the tiniest script she could manage, drew lines of ink carefully across the back of her son’s hand. *Callum*, she wrote, and left it at that.

Others might include a birth-date, or kingdom of residence, or the names of the parents. But Sarai was wary, and wrote only what custom dictated. The name.

She wasn’t expecting a response right away. For all the prominence of the mark’s location, it was late, and whoever waited on the other end might well be asleep. She had expected more to be waiting until morning, at the very least. But, mere minutes later—

Clear and careful, a name unfolded on her son’s skin, directly

beneath the one she'd written.

Rayla, it said, and nothing else.

Sarai mulled the name over. It was unusual. Foreign, certainly, though that didn't guarantee anything about how far away the girl might live. In the end, she nodded, and committed the name to her memory. It might be years until Callum could communicate with his soulmate himself, but until then, he deserved to know her name.

She left both names on Callum's hand, and set him gently down to sleep.

*

"He might not be a human," Lain attempted, yet again, looking down for what seemed like the hundredth time at the name on his daughter's hand. "Elves use the common script, too. And the name—it's not unusual. It would fit in well with any of the communities that use Draconic more than we do."

Tiadrin sighed, and eased the glove once again onto Rayla's squirming fingers. It wasn't proper to have one's mark visible in public, but children so often disliked restrictive coverings. "They didn't write the primal," she said, flatly, and that was a tired statement too. "What elf wouldn't write the symbol of the primal their child was born to? It's *tradition*."

The name and the symbol were obligatory. All else—birthdate, location, family—was optional. But there *should* have been a symbol. Moon, or Sun, or Sky, or Earth—even Ocean—there *should* have been a symbol. But there wasn't, and in its absence, they'd omitted Rayla's moon. If her soulmate *was* a human, it would keep him safer. It didn't seem prudent to declare arcanum to a human audience of unknown prejudices.

Lain was quiet, watching as she covered up the damning ink of the

unaccompanied names. "He might not be a human," he repeated, more softly. "Perhaps they omitted his primal for security reasons. Perhaps he's the son of someone important." His brow furrowed. "Perhaps he's a *Startouch* elf."

She snorted. "Fat chance of *that*. And even royalty declare their children's primal." She bent down to kiss her daughter's forehead. "No, Lain. Our daughter has a human soulmate, and we'll just have to live with that."

He frowned, resignation and concern written more clearly on him than the names on Rayla's hand. "...We can't let anyone find out," he said, eventually, defeat weighing on his every word. "She'd never be able to do anything without someone questioning her loyalties. She'd be shunned. We can't let that happen to her."

Tiadrin nodded. It went without saying, really. "We'll tell Runaan and Ethari. Everyone else..." She mulled the name over. Callum. It could mean 'hard-skinned'. It could also, if derived from *Columba*, mean 'dove'. Either way, it was a plainly Draconic name, and Moonshadow elves didn't tend to name their children for Draconic. Others, though... "We'll say he's a Skywing elf," she decided, and her husband hummed approvingly.

"What about Rayla?" he asked, then. "What will we tell her?"

She went quiet. "...I can't lie to my own daughter about her soulmate, Lain," she admitted. "We'll just...have to impress on her the importance of discretion. Children aren't always the best at keeping secrets, but..."

He held silent for a moment, then smiled. "She's a Moonshadow elf. She'll be fine," he said, and she wished she could share his confidence.

"We'll see," Tiadrin said, noncommittal, and left it to that.

Once or twice in his early years, Callum experienced little hints of the shared skin between himself and his soulmate. Here and there, he felt phantom fingertips against the back of his hand, the weight of unfamiliar cloth, and—once—the sharp sting of a scratch from some sort of animal across the skin. It healed quickly, as all blemishes on soulmarks did, but he'd gone crying to his mother from the unexpected pain anyway.

People were circumspect about their soulmarks, and that was part of the background hum of culture that he was raised to. He wasn't to show his soulmark in public. He wasn't even to say where it was. He wore fingerless gloves, on both hands, to disguise it—and, at least until he was able to talk to her, he wasn't even supposed to tell anyone her name.

He did, though.

He finger-spelled it out to Aunt Amaya, albeit clumsily. "Her name is Rayla," he said, almost solemnly, with the motions of his hands. She smiled at him indulgently and raised a finger to her lips in a 'hush' motion.

She wasn't the only person he told. He told the officer of the Standing Battalion who was watching his mother and Amaya's latest sparring match. He told the baker that they went to buy sweets from. He told near everyone he met, when he was going through the typical three-year-old's phase of desperate interest in the phenomenon of a soulmate, and his mother sighed at him for it every time.

Again and again, he asked her to write something to Rayla. To ask questions, to find out something more about her, *anything*. He *had a soulmate*, and he wanted to know more about her than her name and skin colour.

"It wouldn't be right, Callum," she told him, patiently. "Only soulmates should speak through their skin. You'll just have to wait until you can write to her yourself."

Callum scowled, and set back into learning his alphabet very vehemently indeed. Because that was the thing:

It wasn't *proper* for someone else to write to your soulmate for you. It wasn't even proper to be walked through spelling out an introduction. When you first wrote to your soulmate, you were supposed to do it yourself. And you were *supposed* to wait until you were good enough to manage basic conversation, too.

Callum didn't *want* to wait until he had words to communicate with. So, one evening, in abject defiance of custom and propriety, he took off his glove and doodled a little flower on the back of his hand. He fell asleep feeling particularly pleased with himself, and somehow, didn't consider that writing upon shared skin might garner a response.

He woke to a tiny, clumsy flower-doodle scrawled beside his own.

Rayla was something of a lonely child. She didn't have friends her age, having never meshed well with the other children. She didn't play like the other children did, preferring instead to train with Runaan, or go off sneaking into the forest alone. She didn't socialise and the closest thing she had to friends were the adoraburrs she brought home by the armful. So, really, it shouldn't have been a surprise that she became so taken with her soulmate.

It started when, one day, Rayla ran up to them with her expression so bright it was impossible not to smile back at her. And then they saw *what* was on her hand, and Tiadrin had to restrain a surprised laugh at the neat little flower doodled on her daughter's hand. "Oh, well," She managed, and shared a glance with Lain. "That's..." She

remembered, for a moment, that this was a human, but... “That’s incredibly cute.” She sighed in the end, because it *was*, and Rayla was so charmingly pleased with the tiny drawing. “Congratulations, Rayla.”

“It’s only a flower,” said their rambunctious, headstrong little girl, but there was no hiding how delighted she was. “He didn’t even *write* anything.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know how, yet,” Tiadrin said, while she tried to remember how old Rayla’s soulmate was. “He’s not quite four, and that’s very young for writing.” She shook her head. “Well, I suppose we’d best get you your skin-inks, if you’re going to be talking now. Or drawing.” Suddenly, she levelled her daughter with a penetrating look. “Remind me what you know about talking to your soulmate, Rayla.”

She stilled for a second, and fell from her childish delight into the more bullheaded determination that accompanied her through her training. “Nothing ‘bout elves, or Xadia, or where we live, or anyone’s names, or magic, or assassins.”

Lain reached out and ruffled her hair. “Good girl,” he praised and she beamed at him. When she was older, no doubt, she’d chafe against those restrictions. They’d make it very hard to talk to one’s soulmate about anything of substance, after all. But for now, she was content.

Rayla puffed up. “I’m gonna draw him an adoraburr!” She announced, and both of her parents made despairing noises.

“Rayla, honey, adoraburrs are magic,” Tiadrin explained, patiently, and her daughter’s face fell. Evidently, this might be more challenging than they’d thought.

(Rayla drew the adoraburr anyway. Adoraburrs were *everywhere*, after all. What could it hurt?)

*

Callum kept up a clandestine exchange of doodles with his soulmate for months before his mother found out. Rayla always used some sort of weird ink that washed off his skin really easily, while his ink lingered in faded outlines for days after he scrubbed it off. It was that which caught him, in the end.

“*Callum*,” his mother sighed, a little despairingly, at the evidence of many successive generations of doodles on the skin of his hand. “You’re supposed to wait until you can *write*.”

He made a face at her from the side of the bath, where he really should have expected he’d be caught. “It’s not *hurting* anyone,” he muttered, chagrined. “We’re just drawing.”

She pursed her lips, reluctantly curious. “She draws back? Or does she write?”

“She draws,” he admitted. “She got this weird ink that washes off easy.”

After a brief correction to his grammar, she shook her head. “Skin-ink. It’s made to wash off. I’ll have to get you some, I suppose.” She watched him almost tiredly for several long moments, then said “I’ll not stop you from drawing to each other, Callum. But this means we’ll need to have your security lessons earlier than normal. There are things you’re not supposed to talk to soulmates about—things that could hurt the kingdom. Do you understand?”

He didn’t. But he pretended he did, to make her happy.

In the end, she held the skin-inks hostage until he could dutifully rattle off the list of things he wasn’t supposed to talk about. This included: local governance, anything about how much food people had or where the food or water was kept, anything about the military (this being especially relevant, considering his mother and

—
aunt), anything about the nobility, and a laundry list of other things.

When he was older, he'd understand the rationale behind it; that the careless words of children to their soulmates could reach the ears of adults who knew how to use them. A complaint about always being hungry might not mean much to the soulmate—but to an adult, it might indicate famine in a neighbouring kingdom. It might indicate weakness. And there were many such ways to damn one's nation.

Of course, by the time he understood, he was himself a member of the nobility—a prince of Katolis. The damage an unwary prince might do with spilled secrets was potentially catastrophic, and so the lessons were drummed into his head until he almost felt wary to so much as touch the nib of his pen to the back of his hand. It would be so *easy* to give something away.

But, for now, he was only a child, and the ink on his skin held no secrets. He drew flowers, and birds, and cats, and dogs, and horses. His soulmate drew flowers, and weird circles with eyes, and animals that either had spikes on their heads or extra ears, and occasionally she attempted birds too. She wasn't very good, but the drawings were from her, so he treasured them anyway.

He just *wished* he could write already, and talk to her properly.

*

Callum tugged on his mother's sleeve and requested a writing test every week. And, every time, she looked over whatever she'd told him to write, praised his progress, and said, "Not yet."

Not yet, every time. It meant 'you are not yet at the level appropriate for talking to a soulmate', and Callum thought it was an exceptionally annoying standard to hold someone to. It wasn't like he and Rayla weren't already sort-of talking, with their pictures. What did it *matter* if his spelling was bad or his handwriting messy

—
or his letters extremely slow to form? But his mother was adamant.

Time passed, and in the wake of the great upheavals in his life, Callum wished more than ever before that he could talk to his soulmate. His mother married royalty, and she was crowned Queen, and Callum named prince, and in the overwhelming confusion of trying to adapt to life in the castle he *desperately* wished he could talk to Rayla about it. He didn't have anyone to talk to, really. The only kids at the castle were Lord Viren's children, and he didn't know them well enough to confide in. But Rayla was his soulmate. He should be able to talk to her, right?

...But then, he realised, when his mother started to hesitate a little before saying "not yet," he wouldn't be able to talk to Rayla about this, anyway. His mother marrying a King, and him moving into a castle...that was big, important stuff. The sort of stuff soulmates weren't meant to talk about, if they didn't know for sure which kingdom they were loyal to.

That realisation left him sour and solemn for days. Still, he wanted to be able to talk to her about *some* things, even if not the big stuff that he wasn't allowed to mention. He thought he was getting close to being pronounced ready, but...

In the end, Rayla lost patience before he did.

When Callum felt the scrawl of pen on his skin, it was an automatic reflex to duck away to somewhere secluded to peel off his glove and watch. This time, though, the scrawl just...kept going, as he headed for a secluded spot among a few trees, and he thought she must be drawing something unusually large and elaborate.

He just about fell over when he removed the glove to find words there.

The handwriting was messy, and slow to form. He was slow to read it. But it was unmistakably *words*.

Are you ever gonna write? Rayla asked, through their shared skin, and he stared at the back of his hand with his heart beating so hard it made his head feel weird and dizzy and hot. She was *talking* to him! Really talking!

After a moment, she underlined ‘ever’.

He panicked for several long minutes about what he should do. Mom said he shouldn’t. She said ‘*not yet*’. But that was about *him* making contact. The younger soulmate was supposed to do it first, after all.

He hesitated, rummaged for his pen and inks, and finally wrote *Sorry. Mom won’t let me yet*. It took him a long time. The letters were huge and messy and barely fit on the shared skin. He felt reflexively embarrassed for his handwriting for the first time, and suddenly understood why his mother might be saying ‘not yet’.

There was a pause as she wiped off her skin-inks and both sets of words vacated his skin. In her impatience, she left a vague inky smear behind. *But you just wrote now*, she pointed out, and—and his face burned, he felt unbearably shy and unbearably excited and even *nervous* all at once...was this how people *normally* felt when they talked to soulmates for the first time?

He ducked his head, flushed, and scrawled *You did it first*. He accidentally wrote over some of her letters in the process.

She washed off the inks again. *Yeah, cause you were taking forever!!* She paused, then added a few more exclamation marks for emphasis. *I was so bored waiting*.

After a brief pause where he carefully sounded out the word ‘*waiting*’ to figure out what it said, he wrote *Me too*.

Waiting had been annoying, and senseless, and stupid. Maybe it was a bit embarrassing to put bad handwriting on someone else’s skin, but...shouldn’t that be up to *them* to decide? If she still wanted to talk

even though his writing was bad...then wasn’t it okay?

She had contacted *him*. He couldn’t be blamed for that, right?

...And it wasn’t like he hadn’t already broken tradition by drawing, anyway.

As soon as she washed their ink off, he started writing again. *But we’re writing now, so I guess it’s okay?*

Finally! Rayla wrote, in a quick and victorious scrawl, and also drew a little smiley face next to it. It was fairly delightful.

I’m Callum, he offered, a little shyly, after a moment. This, at least, he had practiced a lot.

I know. She wrote, the letters blocky and cheerful. *I’m Rayla*.

I know, he scrawled back, and imagined that on the other side of their connection, she was smiling too.

*

Callum learned a lot of things about his soulmate, in the weeks after she opened contact.

He learned that she liked to go exploring in the woods, which her town was inside. She wouldn’t say much about her town, but he got the idea it was pretty small.

He learned that she spent most of her time ‘training’, and while she wouldn’t say what she was training *for*, he gathered that it involved weapons and fighting and—apparently—being able to jump and flip around a lot.

He learned that she loved her parents and had two sort-of uncles who were married to each other, and one of those uncles was the

one who trained her.

He learned that she absolutely *detested* water, and was terrified of it, and even the prospect of a bath was completely awful to her.

He learned that she was stubborn, and determined, and occasionally so blunt it was kind of rude. He learned that she didn't really have friends, and while she put on a good show of not caring about that...

We're friends, though, he pointed out to her, and felt the warmth of her fingertips lingering beneath the words for several minutes before she replied.

Yeah, she said, and that was all.

*

Rayla learned many things about her soulmate, in turn.

He was kind of shy, and got nervous easily, and wasn't very good at talking to the kids where he lived. He had moved towns not all that long ago, and really wasn't used to it yet, and found the new place kind of big and scary. He loved his mother an insane amount, and... didn't seem to have a father. His mother had remarried, though, and had a baby on the way. He was cautiously excited about that.

He wasn't good at fighting, and though he'd started sword lessons, he hated it and wished he didn't have to do it. He took a lot of lessons—with *tutors*, instead of at a school—and wasn't terribly keen on those, either. What he *did* like was drawing, and even though they could write now, he kept drawing things for her. Because he wanted to.

I want to draw stuff for you, he wrote, very firmly, and Rayla's heart fluttered too much for her to think of objecting.

In all, he was really nice, considering he was a human.

...Maybe he wouldn't be so nice, though, if he knew that she was an elf.

*

Callum was a shy and often tongue-tied boy out in the halls and grounds of the castle. In private, though, he never seemed to stop talking. And, unsurprisingly, one of his absolute favourite topics was his soulmate. As such, Sarai found out very rapidly when they'd started writing, and honestly wasn't surprised by it at all. Only a little exasperated.

Time passed and Callum chattered, and Sarai grew to know a lot about her son's soulmate. But there were things about her that she *didn't* know. That she hadn't even *guessed* about. Until...

"She spells things weirdly," Callum confided, one day, while she was brushing his hair. "I tried telling her she was spelling stuff wrong but she just said that *I'm* spelling stuff wrong. Like 'color'. She puts a 'u' in it. And she spells 'mom' with a 'u' too. It's so *weird*."

Sarai paused, brush stilling in his hair for a second, before she made herself complete the stroke. "Oh?" She said, lightly, allowing no trace of her unease into her voice. "That is odd. Does she spell any other words like that?"

Callum thought for a while. "She uses 's' instead of 'z' a lot?" He ventured. "Like...she'll spell 'realize' with an 's'. And sometimes she uses different words for things too. She calls pants '*trousers*'. I think maybe she's from a kingdom where they say stuff different?"

"The common tongue does change a little, depending on where it's spoken," Sarai agreed, by all appearances unbothered. "So more likely than not, your Rayla speaks and writes with her own regional dialect." She paused, then carefully asked, "Did she ever say where she was from?"

She could almost *hear* Callum's face scrunching up. "No," he admitted. "I guess she's had security lessons too. I know she lives somewhere in a huge forest, though. She talks about it a lot."

Sarai hummed, with the usual fond interest, and didn't ask him to tell her more. He would, in time; he loved talking about his soulmate. If she *asked*, it would only make him suspicious. He was a bright boy. He'd *notice*. "Maybe one day she can give you tree-climbing lessons," she suggested, and then that was all he could talk about for the next hour.

She listened more closely, after that. And, slowly, day by day, the clues started adding up.

"She says she lives inside a *tree*!" Callum declared one day, absolutely astonished and absolutely delighted and wanting her to know all about it. "A tree big enough that they could carve a house inside it! That must be so *cool*!"

Sarai agreed easily that it was very cool, and did not mention that there were no trees so large within the Pentarchy.

"I still draw her stuff, even though we can write now," her son said cheerfully, maybe a few weeks after the treehouse revelation. "She draws back sometimes, but she doesn't like doing it because she doesn't think she's very good at it."

"What does she draw?" Sarai inquired, and was presented with his hand, the skin-ink a little smudged around the shape of a fuzzy ball with a cute little face.

"Mostly these round fuzzy things," he confided. "Sometimes she draws them stacked on each other."

For a moment, she couldn't answer. She stared, silent, at what was unmistakably an adoraburr, one of those creatures so common and omnipresent in Xadia that sometimes their charred fuzzy bodies

were found fallen into the crevices of the Breach. Viren frequently received shipments of them. Apparently they were useful in some spells.

"Cute," she commented, in the end, and knew by her son's abrupt quietness that she hadn't quite managed to hide her reaction.

She went to Harrow, almost as soon as she let Callum go out to play.

"I think Callum's soulmate is an elf," she said to him, without preamble, as soon as they were in private. He froze, and studied her, and watched her with wide eyes as he exhaled. He reached out and took her hand.

"Tell me everything," he said, and she did. She explained the dialect, and the treehouse, and the adoraburrs, and every other clue her son had cheerfully rattled off at her over the months.

They brought Viren in. He agreed, from his acquaintance with stolen Xadian texts, that the dialect matched. He mentioned that there were enormous forests in Xadia not all that far from the border, and that they were home to a number of communities of Moonshadow elves. There might be other great forests elsewhere, of course. But that was the one he knew of.

From there on, she started noting down everything. The vague idea of 'maybe she's a Moonshadow elf' went from 'possible' to 'very likely' when Sarai relayed the soulmate's enthusiasm for a monthly community dance that—when she checked—turned out to fall on the *full moon*, every month. (Coincidentally, Callum had stopped complaining about his ballroom dancing lessons. She'd have found this much cuter if not for the circumstances.)

"The history texts I have say that Moonshadow elf tradition places a lot of emphasis on dancing." Viren told her, almost apologetically, when she came back with this latest report.

“There’s no sense denying it any more, is there,” Sarai said, wearily, rubbing at her aching temples. Her son’s soulmate was an elf. Perhaps a *Moonsadow elf*, even, and those were some of the deadliest and most vicious elves there were. Combined with all of Callum’s mentions of his soulmate’s *training*...

Harrow laid his hand on her arm in warm, wordless reassurance. “What do you want to do?” he asked, quiet, and she sighed.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. In the end, it took a long talk with her sister before she made up her mind, and even then...it was hard to know what to do. How to *react*.

“He should know.” Was Amaya’s brusque opinion, expression laced with sympathy as she signed. “He’s a prince now, and he needs to know to watch his words around this soulmate of his. It’s a shame, but he’s hardly the first person to have an enemy for a soulmate.”

“There’s that,” Sarai agreed, glumly, and tried to stop worrying about what it meant for her son’s future, that his soulmate was an *elf*.

It was hard, telling him. Hard to sit him down and inform him, very seriously, that she was near certain that his soulmate was an elf. It was hard to watch the way his expression went...blank, almost. Closed-off, for a few seconds before it became confused and vulnerable instead.

“...What does this *mean*?” He asked, quiet, and she wasn’t sure what to tell him.

“It means that you need to be very, very careful what you tell her,” She said, in the end, because that was what she knew. “Her people are at war with ours, Callum. I won’t tell you to cut contact with her—she’s your soulmate. You couldn’t. But...” She exhaled, and shook her head. “I’ll get you some reading.”

She sent him off with a number of historical accounts about the

tragedies of loyalty and heartbreak that could come from soulbonds divided by war, and wished that fate had been kinder.

*

Callum was quiet for days, after he learned the truth. He read through the books his mother gave him, even though they were long with tiny script and big words that he didn’t know, and felt more and more upset at the possibilities they implied for his future.

His soulmate...was an enemy. An *elf*. One of the people Aunt Amaya called *bloodthirsty monsters*.

He was short and brusque in his replies to her, for a while. He looked at the almost purplish hue of the shared skin with new eyes, and wondered what she looked like. Did she have horns? Pointy ears? The wrong number of fingers and toes? He’d wondered what she looked like before, of course, but...never in terms of how *inhuman* she might look.

She caught on to his strange behaviour very quickly. *Did something happen?* She asked him, through their skin, her handwriting its familiar blocky scrawl. *You’ve been all quiet.*

He wasn’t sure what to say. Wasn’t sure how to reconcile his feelings towards Rayla, his closest friend and his soulmate, with the knowledge that she was an elf. *Kind of*, he wrote, in the end, heart heavy. He wished his mother hadn’t told him. He wished he didn’t know. *I found some stuff out, and I don’t know what to think.*

There was a pause while she washed the ink off. And then: *Do you want to talk about it?*

He didn’t. Not then. So he passed the following weeks, reading her usual reports of daily life, and wondering what exactly she was training *for*, day after day after day. Why such long hours, when she was so young? Who exactly was she planning on using those combat

skills against?

They were heavy thoughts for a child as young as he was, but there was hardly any escaping them. He tried to focus on happier things, like his mother's pregnancy, and the nigh arrival of his younger sibling. He tried to think of how Claudia was pretty and friendly and fun to talk to, and definitely wasn't an elf. He tried to think of a lot of things that weren't his soulmate, and failed fairly thoroughly.

In the end, after weeks of stilted conversation, he couldn't take it anymore, and sat down with skin-ink and pen to write: *You're an elf, aren't you.*

She didn't reply for a long time. But eventually, he felt the tickle of a pen-nib at the back of his hand, and retreated into private to peel off the glove. *Yeah*, she'd written, and nothing else. Not for a few minutes. Then: *You're a human.*

It wasn't a question. He hesitated, wiped off the ink, and wrote *You knew?*

Yeah, she said again, and then haltingly explained. Apparently, elves wrote their children's names to their soulmates just like humans did, except they *always* included some sort of magic symbol, so her parents had known he was human the second his name came through without it.

He asked what hers was. He probably shouldn't have, and she probably shouldn't have answered, but she did. She drew a little symbol, and he took it carefully to his mother.

"Moonshadow elf," she concluded, with an honest sympathy like someone offering condolences. "Like we thought. I'm sorry, Callum."

I'm sorry, 'like it was a death-sentence.

He sighed, and put his glove back on. "I'll be careful," he promised,

quiet, and left to be alone.

*

Both of them were quieter, after that. There was less idle chatter. Less writing about their days, their experiences, the things that annoyed them and the things they enjoyed. He still wrote—he didn't think he could have stopped himself if he tried. But there was a *wariness* between them now that he hated.

Still. There were at least some advantages to having an elf on the other end of his soulbond. Investigating rumours, for one. *My friend says elves drink blood*, he wrote, one day, with a sort of morbid interest. *Is that true?*

What?? No!! She wrote, furiously, and then underlined it twice and circled it for good measure.

She reciprocated, sometimes.

Is it true humans have extra fingers? She asked, and he responded by drawing his hand onto the back of his hand. *Weird*, was her response to that, and despite everything, he couldn't help but smile.

*

I heard that in Xadia everything is magic, he wrote, one day. *Is that true? What's it like?*

She hesitated a long while, then wrote *I'm not supposed to talk about magic. Or Xadia.*

It hurt, a little. But in the end, they both had their security lessons, and their people were still at war. There was nothing to be done.

Eventually, he wrote what had been on his mind for months, now. *I wonder how we'll meet*, he said, with a twist of emotion that was half

unease and half interest. It was on his mother's mind, he knew, and it was certainly a thought he kept coming back to, for good reason.

Soulmates *always* met eventually, whether or not they contrived to. Even if they tried to avoid it...it would happen someday. His mother was worried about it. The circumstances under which a Prince of Katolis might meet an elf were almost exclusively unpleasant, after all. But he entertained childish thoughts of peace treaties and reconciliation, and clung to them, as unlikely as they might be.

I have no idea, Rayla answered him eventually, and he wondered if she was worried, too.

*

The next year or so was eventful for both of them. Callum's little brother was born, and he instantly became utterly enchanted with him. He wrote to Rayla at considerable length about how tiny his fingers and toes were, how fuzzy his hair was, how he didn't have a soulmark yet at all. He never wrote his name, because names were forbidden, but Rayla seemed entertained enough by the stories anyway.

Some time later, Rayla went quiet for a while, and was plainly subdued by something. Eventually, she admitted that her parents had agreed to taking a job that meant they had to go away. She wouldn't see them more than once a year, now, if that. Whatever job it was, it was supposedly an honour; but that didn't help how much she missed them. She was living with her uncles, now.

You can write letters to them, maybe? He suggested. It wasn't as good as the real-time writing between soulmates, but it was better than nothing.

I guess, she said, but didn't seem very enthusiastic about it. Her life changed, but Callum's went on.

*

And then Callum's life shattered around him.

He shut himself in his room and cried for hours, burying his face in his hands, until tears were streaming between his fingers and his chest hurt and everything felt so *awful* he had no idea how to cope. How could he? She was *gone*.

Not much could carry across shared skin. But evidently, enough of the salt-water managed it for Rayla to be alarmed. By the time he checked what she'd written, the tears had smeared and diluted the inks, but the words were still recognisable. *Is something wrong?* She'd asked, hurried enough that it looked alarmed. *Are you crying?*

He nearly collapsed, when he went to get the inks. Could hardly see through tears when he wrote, lopsided and awful, *My mom is dead*. Writing it was terrible. An admission that it was real, it had *happened*, she was *dead*.

Rayla didn't know what to say to that, and he could tell. She wrote *I'm so sorry, Callum*, and asked if there was anything she could do, if he wanted to talk about anything. But there wasn't, and he didn't. Mom was *dead*. What was there to talk about?

Eventually, for lack of anything else to do, Rayla drew him a little flower. She'd done it to try to make him feel better, and—and somehow, that made him start sobbing all over again.

A long way down the line, she asked him how it had happened. He couldn't answer. Of course he couldn't. That the Dragon King had killed her would reveal too much.

But saying *'I can't talk about that'* was revealing in its own way, too.

*

Years passed them by. Callum slowly pieced his life back together around the hole his mother had left, and learned to cope with the loneliness of being without her. His brother grew, and started talking, and swiftly became the dearest person in Callum's life... except, perhaps, for the elf on the other end of his soulbond.

In many ways, things stayed the same. Callum hated his training and Rayla loved hers. He loved drawing—and became very good at it—and Rayla continued to hate water. She remained as stubborn and headstrong as ever, and she remained his friend.

Sometimes, he had no idea what he'd do without her. Soren was kind of an unpleasant friend, most of the time, and Claudia was always too occupied with her books or lessons or brother to answer his attempts to socialise. He had Ezran, of course, but without Rayla...he could only imagine how lonely he'd have been.

Sometimes he remembered that she was an elf, and felt weird about how much he depended on her.

He still wondered how they'd meet.

*

King Harrow and Lord Viren, with very little warning, departed Katolis and rode into Xadia. There, they killed the Dragon King, and his son the Dragon Prince, and returned covered in a glory that Harrow's bearing didn't reflect. Callum wondered if the revenge had felt as hollow to enact as he felt to receive it. *The one who killed mom is dead now*, he thought, and didn't feel vindicated. Didn't feel happy. He just felt...empty. What was the use of it, so many years after her death? She was still dead.

He wished he could talk to Rayla about it. But if names were a forbidden topic, then revealing that his step-father had ridden into Xadia and killed their King...that was plainly out of the question. So he told her nothing.

He wondered if it was his imagination, that she'd grown quieter anyway. When she wrote, she seemed unhappy. Preoccupied, too.

Weeks passed, and she admitted that she was going to be travelling soon. She didn't say why, or to where, or what for—all of that was proscribed. But she gave it as warning, anyway, that she'd be able to talk less while en route.

In the month that followed, the brevity of their contact left him lonelier than ever.

*

"You must be careful, Rayla," Runaan said to her, in private, where the other assassins couldn't hear. "For the first time, you are venturing into the human kingdoms. You must take particular care to avoid meeting your soulmate."

"Everyone meets their soulmate eventually," she muttered back to him, fingers resting reflexively over the guard on her left hand.

He was unmoved. "Yes. But, with luck, you can avoid it taking place on *this* mission."

It was, in fairness, a very important mission. She sighed. "I'll do my best," she promised, though it wasn't exactly within her control.

When the full moon was nigh, and the bindings tight around her wrists, Rayla broke into Katolis Castle and went looking for her quarry.

The first non-soldier she found was a young human boy, maybe around her age. She didn't know how old Prince Ezran was, but she knew he wasn't an adult, and...according to what she'd been taught, this boy was wearing pretty high-quality clothes. If he wasn't Ezran, he should at least know who was.

She chased him. She cornered him. He said, “I am Prince Ezran,” and looked up at her with a resolve and solemnity that didn’t quite manage to mask his fear.

It hit her, then, looking down the length of her blade towards the face of a human boy waiting to die. It hit her that—that he was *afraid*, that he didn’t want to die, that he was a *person*, as much as she was, as much as her *soulmate* was, he was a human just like Callum and she was *here to kill him*—

But...she had to do it. She *had* to. She’d bound herself, it was her *mission*, it was the *justice* that the Dragon Prince deserved. She *had* to.

It was in the midst of trying to talk herself into it, and *him* trying to talk *her* out of it, that a child’s voice emerged from behind a painting.

It said, “Callum,” and she only had a moment for her blood to freeze before, at her feet, the terrified human boy, the boy who had claimed to be Prince Ezran, the boy she’d been about to *kill*—

He answered. He *responded*. It was his *name*.

What were the chances that she’d meet a Callum—the correct age, the correct species, *everything*—and it *wouldn’t* be her soulmate?

The painting edged open, revealing a younger human boy with some sort of weird pet. A pet she’d *heard descriptions of*, in the arms of a child she’d been hearing about since he was born, looking worriedly between her and the boy she *had at swordpoint*—

She realised she’d been frozen for too long. She realised that, one way or another, she had to be *sure*. She reached over, and hit herself *hard* on the back of her left hand.

The human, in an instant and involuntary motion, flinched and

gripped the back of his own left hand. Her heart thudded, and—it only took him a second to realise—

His eyes went wide. He glanced wildly between her and his hand, undoubtedly registering that she was a Moonshadow elf, that she was the right age, that she was—

“*Rayla?*” he squeaked, and if she hadn’t already known for certain, that would have told her.

She lowered her sword, utterly struck by how much of a *disaster* this was.

“Shit,” she said, succinctly, and stared at the astounded face of *her* *soulmate*.

What in Xadia’s name was she supposed to do *now*?

DRESS OF MEMORIES:

A BONUS FOR FANS OF SIDES OF THE MOON

by Tamika Kuno Williams

She still thought about the dress.

Well, maybe not about *the* dress.

She thought about the moments she had in the dress. One in particular.

The gown wasn't something Rayla was accustomed to. Assassins didn't *do* ballgowns. The layers—so many layers—filled out the skirts below a fitted bodice, her skirts forming a cup that buried her legs thoroughly beneath. Gold laced over silver-white from bodice to skirt.

Frankly, it was more than she could handle. At least at first. She became more comfortable wearing it over the course of spending two nights on Callum's arm and she got to explore just how weird humans were. Especially rich humans. Runaan had always warned Rayla about money and how easily humans were corrupted by it.

She was afraid to say that he did have a point about it. He was right.

He'd been right about a great many things about humans. All of this started, after all, because Callum and Ezran were running from their high mage who killed his king. His own dear friend, according to Callum.

She knew it haunted him even if that had allowed him to meet her. Meet all of them: would be assassins turned travelling troupe and escorts to two scared princes. Callum's eyes would grow murky and dark when he spoke about the buildup to his father's death. Rayla usually touched his hand and then he would come back to her.

To reality, she corrected herself.

She shook her head.

She was alone in the room she shared with Andromeda. Andromeda was somewhere probably talking to Runaan and Callisto about their next move. There was only a limited time before they would have to leave the city, even if their enchanted necklaces kept them cloaked as humans considerably well. The innkeeper, too, who had allowed them to stay was watchful, but not suspicious. Herna. Rayla remembered her name. She was kind and asked for little, even if she was a human. But then again, Callum and Ezran were also kind. Maybe Runaan wasn't entirely right. Or not in every instance. He'd been wrong about Rayla's capabilities more than once, after all.

Rayla took a look around the inn room a bit more. When they got back to Xadia, all of this... this human world would be a curiosity again. Maybe a word from Callum—

She tried not to think about whether or not life would take him away from her at that point and very much shoved it to the furthest back corner of her mind. Besides, he might end up staying in the Silvergrove with them. He and Ezran. Everyone else could learn to love them, too. Like she did.

After a few minutes of snooping around the room, she hadn't found too much. A few candles for light, a pair of house slippers and what looked like a man's suit. A decent one, she supposed.

At the end of the closet, she found a long, drab green dress.

Whoever this was meant for was probably supposed to be taller, but then she thought of the white and gold dress from Meraxia. Everything about Meraxia was... a little tainted, clothes, people, and Rayla herself included.

She shuddered. It was a cursed place where human lords and their wives made dolls of elves and their own people. To their own son. Lady Eveline had been enraged by Callum setting their son's spirit free, her murderous sadness. Fear scraped at Rayla's neck; she and Callum had been alone and terrified when he'd realized she'd been taken. Lord Kalf was no longer his father's old friend—not when he was trying to take out her eyes. Not when he was a man who wanted to make *her* into one of those macabre dolls.

Like they had made their son in what Rayla could only describe as the most tragic attempt at keeping him alive. He wasn't alive. He'd been *trapped* until Callum set him free.

The whole traumatizing event had made her remember a conversation with Runaan she once had. He'd warned her about dark mages and the lengths they might go for a Moonshadow elf her age. Something about her youth and how Moonshadow magic related to life and death.

She brought the dress up to herself, feeling the stitching and the fabric between her fingers.

She found the mirror and just looked at herself. At the simple dress.

She imagined it was *that* dress.

Not everything was tainted.

Not the rose garden or the carriage ride or the first night at the ball that was strange territory to her all the same. But it was magical. That much she couldn't deny. It was magical to dance with Callum

to the only song he knew how to and it was magical to have a night she would never have with anyone in Xadia.

Xadia didn't have magic the way she had seen that night.

She'd had to leave the dress, but she still remembered it and was a bit too embarrassed to ask Callum if he could remember it. If he might be willing to draw what she looked like in it.

Too embarrassed to maybe see his face looking at it.

Maybe he would look at it like he looked at her that night.

Maybe.

At the time, she had felt outright *silly*. It was not what she was used to and stepping out to show everyone had been less than thrilling.

But he had promised. He had promised that she looked beautiful. He'd meant it. That's what he said and she couldn't help but believe him when he looked at her like that. Rayla couldn't completely describe it, but it was sincere. Everything Callum did was sincere, really. Perhaps that's why it mattered to her in her dreams and her memories and her life.

Sometimes, she wished they weren't on the run and they could have another night like that. Maybe once they were safer in Xadia, if safe was a possibility

So many maybes and no certainties. She hated it, but she supposed that was the life of an assassin. Callum's sincerity was assured though. That night, he'd looked at her like she was a set of golden stars twinkling against a moonlit sky.

That's what she had, and continued to imagine anyway.

Her fingers ran against the thread of the green dress, eyeing herself in the mirror and imagining it was the one she had felt so different in. She could see it was a good different, now that they were away from the chaos of that strange, magical city. Meraxia was ominous and bright and secretive and beautiful.

It would be nice to go back there one day, when the unhappy memories had faded. When things were more peaceful. She and Callum could go back at night to the rose garden again. With her in a different dress, probably. But Rayla hoped he might look at her the same way. Or in another different, good way.

She wanted him to look at her almost any way that made her feel like that.

Rayla's fingers clenched into the fabric. The thought made her insides twist.

Where did all that come from? She froze. Clearly, being cooped up in this inn was getting to her. Or maybe Runaan was right and she needed to rest before they continued their journey. Even so, her eyes glazed over the dress against her. Maybe it was weak, but she wanted that moment back.

"Rayla?"

Rayla dropped the dress, trying to kick it away. Andromeda was standing at the door with a question on her face. Her eyes found the dress at Rayla's feet and a sense of understanding came to them.

"It's not what you think," Rayla mumbled. "I just wanted to see what it was."

"It's a dress. A gown." Andromeda came in and sat on the edge of the bed. "Not unlike the one from the human city."

She looked away.

"Rayla, it's alright if you were thinking about it. It was... different for you."

"It's not like *that*. I just wanted to look at it because..." Rayla made a face. "Just because," she settled on stubbornly. "I wanted to investigate it."

Andromeda's face remained impassive. "Investigate it."

It was as ridiculous as it sounded. "Just forget it happened, okay? It was stupid."

Andromeda just gave her a look and patted the bed beside her. Rayla crossed her arms, but sat. "Why do you think it's so foolish?"

"We're on a *mission* and it was part of our job. It wasn't like we were there to dance and be in pretty dresses and..." Rayla sighed.

"And enjoy it?"

Rayla bit the inside of her lip.

Andromeda put her hand on Rayla's shoulder. "No, we're not here to do that. And, yes, Runaan would probably caution against it. Even disapprove, maybe. But that doesn't mean you weren't allowed to like it. Rayla, enjoying how you looked in a dress is normal for anyone. Especially girls your age. There's nothing wrong with that."

Somehow, Andromeda managed to relieve and embarrass her at the same time.

"You want to go back to that place."

Rayla hunched her shoulders. She didn't look.

“Rayla? Look at me?” Rayla obeyed. Andromeda’s green eyes were calming. “Listen to me. Don’t feel ashamed for wanting small, intimate moments with the people you care about or the experiences you enjoyed. I remember as many as I can with my little brother before he passed. I’d do anything to go back to those moments.”

“I... yours has a good reason though. Mine—”

“Is also a good reason. You don’t need a special reason to want to want to relive a nice moment you had. Besides... it’s not that silly to want a boy to think you looked nice. Even if he is human.”

Why was it so hot in here?

“I don’t care if Callum thinks I looked nice,” Rayla retorted.

Andromeda smiled. She shrugged. “Of course.”

“I don’t!”

Andromeda only smiled. Rayla usually liked her more in these moments where she let down her serious demeanor. Now it was the exact opposite.

Andromeda left Rayla to her own devices with a faint curve across her lips and Rayla feeling like she wanted to crawl into a hole.

It was just a stupid dress from a stupid night over—

Over a not so stupid dance.

In a not so stupid rose garden.

With a maybe silly adorably stupid prince.

She picked up the green dress from the floor and hung it back up in the closet. Later, she pretended the white and gold ballgown was the one hanging in there instead.

*

“Hey, there you are.”

Rayla looked up from sharpening her swords. She had chosen to sit in the hallways instead of being cooped up in that room and the dress that made her think silly things. Callum found her and took a seat beside her. He had that twinkle in his eye.

“You find some new spell you’re going to zap me with again?” she drawled.

He made a face at her. She never minded his faces. “No. And I said I was sorry for that, remember?”

She bit her lip. “I know you did. I forgave you, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. It took a lot to get you to like me at all. Callisto gave me the wisest advice: don’t strike you with lightning again.”

“Funny you couldn’t figure that out on your own,” she said dryly. Callum frowned a little and she smiled. “What is it you wanted to show me?”

Callum’s eyes lip up. “Oh, right. I drew something for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, for you.” He smiled like it shouldn’t be that surprising. “I don’t know why, but I was thinking about it and... I was hoping you might like it. I know those couple nights weren’t the *greatest*, exactly, but...”

He handed her his sketchbook. It was a girl in a gown and a boy dancing. Why was it so hot in here?

An elven girl. Herself. It was Rayla in the ballgown from Meraxia. Her hair was swept up and she looked like herself, without the necklace that had made her appear human. But more stunning was that Callum had portrayed her as beautiful and elegant and somehow still herself. Somehow, he managed to make this sketch feel like it was a tiny peek back into that glistening ballroom.

“Callum...” He was rubbing the back of his neck and she could already see the regret in his eyes. “No, no, this is... *really amazing*.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she said earnestly, taking his arm. “Yes. I love it. Not everything that happened that night was... good. But this was good. Spending time with you the way we did. That was good. I’m... I’m glad you drew this. I was kind of afraid you wanted to forget it.”

“Not you,” he said quickly. He cleared his throat. “I mean, you looked beautiful and we had a lot of fun before things became... yeah, listen. I just don’t want to forget the parts we did love. Or the way you looked like you were enjoying yourself. And you’re a great dancer. I drew this so I could remember it. Always. If... it’s okay with you.”

Rayla had no words to describe the warmth swelling in her chest.

“I don’t want to forget you, too, Callum.”

She wasn’t sure there were many things better than Callum’s happiness at her approval of his idea. They stayed there for a while and this time, when he started sketching another picture of them together, Rayla watched him.

*I love you, too,
Callum.*

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XADIA MOD SQUAD

DANA RABER AKA FAERIE.ANA

Our People Mod! Dana is the sweet, brilliant and the heart of the Xadia Mod Squad. She does the massively important job of being the main manager of all our contributors. Her ability to handle the whims and needs of our contributors keeps everyone on-task and the ship running smoothly. She's also a tremendously talented artist with a skill for traditional artwork. You can trust Dana like no other. Not only is she sweet, but she's reliable without any shred of doubt.

TAYLOR AKA RASPB

Taylor is a wonderful artist and an even more wonderful person. She is our Merch Mod! Taylor is our main curator of nearly all the merch on the zine. Our whopping 17 pieces of merch is largely due to her hard work and passion for fan merch. She's also a fandom household name, especially in the Rayllum circles.

PORSCHE

Porsche is our Finance mod. Our Bouncer and Business mod as well as a talented writer. He takes care of the incredibly important, but maybe not so fun part of creating a zine: the math. Porsche is a staple to our team and without him, we wouldn't be able to do any of this. You could even call him a Fairy Godmod if you will. He makes dreams come true. Porsche does the job that many in fandom aren't fond of and he does it with efficiency and pride. Our team is incomplete without him.

TAMIKA KUNO WILLIAMS

Tamika is a passionate and relentlessly dedicated artist, writer and co-host of the Hot Brown Morning Potion podcast as well as our Design Mod. Her job has been to make all aesthetic decisions, create nearly all the graphics and to actually put this 400 page document together, including designing and curating the look of the book. Her vision is at the heart of this zine as she pushes the team toward the stars.

RAAYLLUM AKA WORDSWITHDRAGONS

Our Beta Fic Mod, Dragons is an incredible human being who loves Rayllum with a fiery passion. Her job on this zine is to be the moderator of all the writing (100 pages!) of Rayllum coming into the zine to ensure quality and control in the content that you're receiving. Her dedication, love and patience makes her a welcome addition to any team, including our own. She's got a narrative gut made out of titanium steel and is more than well-versed in the art of narrative storytelling.

